'This advice will change your life. It did mine.'
Kay Allinson, co-founder of *Pinch of Nom*

YOU'RE NOT THE PROBLEM

The Impact of Narcissism and Emotional Abuse and How to Heal

HELEN VILLIERS LLB, P.G. CERT, P.G. DIP, MA
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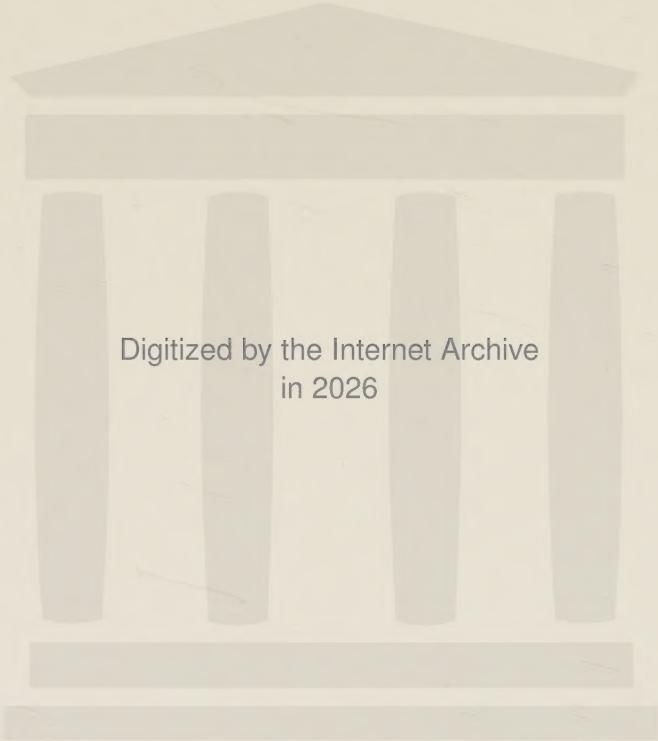
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You're Not the Problem

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The Impact of Narcissism and Emotional Abuse and How to Heal

Helen Villiers LLB, P.G. CERT, P.G. DIP, MA
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Disclaimer

This book is intended to help readers understand and recover from the impact of narcissistic parenting. It is not a substitute for personalised therapeutic help from a suitably qualified person. All names and identifying details have been changed to protect the privacy of others. 'Megan', 'Jane', 'Rebecca' and 'Jack' are an amalgam of various individuals and circumstances. The authors and publishers are not liable for any damage arising from the contents.

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To all the adult children of narcissistic parents, we see you,
we hear you; you are not, and never were, the problem
K & H x

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Introduction

In the 70s we learned about the impact of physical abuse. In the 90s we learned about the impact of sexual abuse. Now we are learning about the impact of emotional abuse and narcissism.

Emotional abuse impacts every single part of our lives. There is nothing it doesn't touch. Work, friendships, relationships and, crucially, our parenting – because emotional abuse is so insidious and toxic that the effects continue throughout the survivor's life. Emotional abuse is the cornerstone of *all* abuse, and, without it, no other abuse can exist. Why?

This can be explained using the date analogy: if you went on a first date with someone and they punched you in the face, you would probably report them to the police and not see them again. However, if you went on twenty dates and built a connection with that someone, were exposed to their manipulation in the form of 'love bombing', and possibly even 'breadcrumbing' (just two of many manipulative behaviours that we will explain over the course of this book), and started liking them, you could be trauma bonded, and therefore more likely to forgive the punch, find a reason for it and believe they didn't mean it. So often, this kind of long-term abuse is down to toxic narcissistic traits in the abuser.

However, many emotionally abusive behaviours from parent to child have become socially acceptable because of the way we repeat things our parents said and did. They were passed down from generation to generation and so persist today. Society plays

a major role here. It pedestals parents (mothers, in particular), exonerating them from accountability for emotional abuse simply by virtue of their parental status. History often shows us that when an institution is placed on such a lofty pedestal, beyond reproach, unacceptable behaviour goes unchallenged. But beneath that lies a web of abuse and deceit, shrouded in smoke.

This is a worldwide conversation. We see it taking place in countless languages on our social media channel comment sections. Narcissistic parenting or emotionally abusive parenting is evident in many cultures, and we see it as endemic across the world and rooted deep in history, perhaps best summed up in the Victorian mantra: 'Children should be seen and not heard'.

In 1989, the most widely ratified human-rights treaty in history was signed by 196 countries (virtually every country in the world), agreeing to the Convention on the Rights of the Child, which set out: the right for children to give their opinions freely on issues that affect them; the right to share freely with others what they learn, think and feel; the right (with parental guidance) to have their own thoughts and opinions; the right to be protected from all kinds of exploitation (being taken advantage of), even if not specifically mentioned in the treaty; the right to protection from violence, abuse and neglect by anyone who looks after them; and the right to rest, relax and play. The child who grows up with narcissistic parents will be denied nearly every single one of these rights.

Indicators that someone has grown up with emotional abuse

Emotional abuse is the use of someone's emotions to control and manipulate them into behaving in the way their abuser desires.

Gaslighting, stonewalling, love bombing, hoovering, deflection, breadcrumbing, the trauma bond, projection (all of which we will look at later) are behaviours that destroy a person's sense of self, their identity and their voice, giving the perpetrator complete control and dominance without lifting a hand.

An adult who has grown up with emotionally abusive parents will typically have anxiety, depression, low self-esteem and a lack of identity; and every relationship they ever have in their adult life, in whatever form, will be catastrophically impacted. They are highly likely to have unhealthy friendships, as well as romantic and work relationships that look similar to the dynamic they had with their emotionally abusive parent, and yet will not understand that they are repeating patterns – a model of love they learned in childhood that they are now taking with them into adulthood.

However, the message they still receive from society, even now, is that they should be grateful for how they were raised: they had a roof over their head and clothes on their back, after all, and let's not forget that other people have it worse. They've been told to do yoga, meditate, drink green tea and work on their gratitude; oh, and they should work on their forgiveness, too – because it's not their parents' fault they treated them in the way they did; they were doing their best, even if they will never apologise for the things that hurt their child.

The messages our clients grow up with are that they shouldn't be angry, because only an ungrateful, selfish, disloyal, spoiled, self-centred, demanding, entitled person would ever criticise their parents. They are forced to deny their very justified feelings and abandon themselves in totality, over and over again.

What differentiates parents who do not behave like narcissists is their willingness and ability to take responsibility for their

mistakes. The narcissistic parent will never, ever do this. Instead, they will find every reason to blame their child for their treatment of them and convince them they were the problem all along.

Who are we?

Helen is a psychotherapist and couples therapist, with a masters in working therapeutically with adult children of narcissistic parents. As such, she specialises in understanding Narcissistic Personality Disorder (NPD) and the impact it has on children growing up in the narcissistic family system. Katie is also a psychotherapist and specialises in parentification and emotional abuse. Between us, we have over twenty-five years' clinical experience working with adults who have endured these toxic dynamics. Using our academic and clinical backgrounds, in these pages we will explain emotional abuse and narcissism, and offer tools and techniques to recognise, respond to and heal from them. We will share information that can heal and help millions of people.

In our work, we identify unhealthy beliefs people have about themselves because their parents or caregivers were emotionally unavailable, non-nurturing, abusive or narcissistic. These continue to play out through adulthood, impacting every area of their lives, repeating the cycles of their childhoods in their adult relationships.

People who grow up with emotional abuse don't know it. They don't think to criticise their parents or question their parenting, because it's all they've ever known. Sometimes they are not even aware of it as adults; they keep on believing that it's them – that *they* are the problem, the faults lie in them and *they* are difficult, oversensitive, ungrateful and so on.

Many people grow up without the tools to say no, or to have healthy conflict, to say what they feel and ask for what they want. They become adults who haven't been shown healthy boundaries or healthy communication, and they are not aware that they've been brought up in a dysfunctional family system. They typically feel enormous guilt about criticising their parents, and resist talking openly and honestly about them. They fiercely protect their parents' image and are often scared to challenge the relationship in case it fractures.

After being subjected to narcissistic behaviour for years, the adult child finds it easier to believe they are unworthy or unlovable. This protects them from the hurt, disappointment, grief and anger they feel. Addressing those beliefs and feelings is a considerable part of our work as therapists.

The aim of this book

Narcissism has become a buzzword, but many use the term without fully understanding it or the impact it has on survivors of a narcissistic parent or partner. This book will empower you to recognise anyone whose parents are toxic, emotionally unavailable, hyper-critical or ignoring – whether your own or someone else's. Not all those parents would be diagnosable as NPD, but the impact of their narcissistic traits will still be dreadful, and sufferers will connect with the content and descriptions we provide throughout. We will explain and illustrate what narcissistic behaviours do to someone, and why. We will show you how to identify emotional abuse – its language and its behaviours – and, if you see them in your own family and relationships, you will discover how to heal from their impact and avoid repeating them yourself.

We aim to shatter the illusion used by narcissists to dominate and control. The narcissistic parent convinces their child they had the perfect family and upbringing, and that any problem they have with their childhood is down to them, not their parents.

This is a book of two halves. In the first half we explore NPD – what it looks like, how the narcissistic parent impacts their children and the different types of emotional abuse specific to NPD. The second half explains different ways to heal the trauma caused by the emotional abuse inflicted by someone with NPD. We will also introduce you to Jane, Jack, Megan and Rebecca (not their real names), who will appear throughout the book to help illustrate the lived experience of growing up with narcissistic parents, showing how, while it can look very different for each person, the impact is equally devastating. Breaking down deep-seated defences is a crucial aspect of therapy, and one way in which we can start to do this is with the stories of others. People who've had similar experiences can identify and begin to understand themselves as a first step to letting go of the toxic, unhealthy beliefs they hold about themselves.

The legacy and the damage caused by narcissistic and emotionally abusive parents lives on and it will continue to do so, perpetuated by trauma and repeating cycles, unless we learn to recognise and understand it – unless we, both as individuals and as a society, learn how to challenge it and stop its vicious cycle of destruction. That is what this book intends to do.

Take care,

Katie and Helen

CHAPTER 1

Is Your Parent a Narcissist?

> Rebecca: 'I never understood why I wasn't good enough. I didn't know how to make her love me. I spent my whole childhood confused, sad and bewildered. Why? What was wrong with me?'

Narcissistic parents can be broken down into four groups, as follows:

The engulfing parent

This is someone who is smothering and wants to know everything their child is doing and who they are doing it with. They treat privacy as though it's being secretive and think nothing of reading journals, relying on their children for emotional and practical support. They use stonewalling (emotional abandonment) and guilt tripping to manipulate their child into meeting their needs above everyone else's.

The critical parent

This parent is highly critical of their children, whether it's about who their friends are, their weight, their clothes, their behaviour, their schoolwork – whatever it is, nothing is ever good enough for them (although that's true of all narcissistic parents). They will be judgemental of everyone around them, commenting negatively on everything and everyone, and will openly devalue anyone who threatens their superiority.

- **The ignoring parent**

This is someone who takes little to no interest in their children, demands they do as they ask and only spends time with them when they are doing their bidding. They put their own needs above everyone else's and get explosively angry when asked for anything more than they're willing to offer. They will often have very high expectations of their children and are very strict.

- **The combination parent**

A narcissistic parent will either fit into one of these categories with elements of the others, or they may fit into all of them equally (as we'll see in Rebecca's case, below). We've used the following client stories to describe these parents and some of the impact they have.

Megan (child of the engulfing parent)

Megan felt special as a child because her mother would confide in her and share her marital worries with her. 'I remember being so proud that I was able to help my mother because she had no one else to talk to,' she says. Growing up, Megan was very close with her family – they did everything together. However, in reality, there were no boundaries in Megan's home. Everyone knew everyone else's business and had an opinion on it. She and her siblings were expected to follow the beliefs and values of her parents and were criticised, mocked or shamed when they voiced a difference of opinion. They were not allowed to be individuals or anything other than what their parents expected them to be.

Megan was often described as her mother's shadow or 'Mummy's little helper' because she loved to help cook and clean. But her responsibilities went beyond what was age appropriate and when Megan didn't want to help, her mother would withdraw love and affection from her. She was her mother's confidante, mini therapist and round-the-clock emotional caretaker.

Megan's family judged people both within and outside of the family. It effectively became a competition to see who could complain the least and had the fewest needs to be met. 'At twelve, we bought our own uniforms and books; we never asked for anything.'

Megan's parents not only overly relied on her emotionally, they also exploited their children financially. Megan recalled being involved in managing their finances, earning money and paying family bills when she was just thirteen.

Megan's mother placed burdens on her to such an extent she often felt her mother couldn't cope without her. She felt emotionally more mature than her parents and therefore responsible for solving the challenges that her family members faced. This huge emotional burden followed her for life, leading her to repeat the pattern of ignoring her own needs and putting others first, especially those she cared about the most.

Megan's mother was dissatisfied in her own life and emotionally unstable, treating her like her friend, rather than a daughter. This left no room for Megan to have her own feelings and emotions and become her own person. It was confusing for her because, to the outside world, her mother seemed doting, but to Megan she was standoffish

and highly critical. 'I never remember my mother hugging us or telling us she loved us. I would hear from other people how she would praise me, yet she would never give me a compliment to my face.'

Sarcasm and fault finding among the children were nurtured and encouraged by Megan's parents, while they themselves were self-involved, making everything about them. They could not give their children the empathic love and nurturance they desperately needed, which meant their emotional needs were neglected, and their emotional cups were not just empty, but running on a deficit, so they had no resources to give each other. The competition for the little bit their parents could give them created fierce sibling rivalry, each child developing their own roles, Megan's being the fixer – the one who would jump to the rescue and try to glue things back together.

Megan learned that her own emotional needs were a threat to the safety of the relationship with her mother, and her survival was based on being able to tune into the needs of others around her. She therefore became a master at reading other people's emotions and anticipating their needs.

This came at a high price, though. Subconsciously, Megan learned it was safer to suppress rather than acknowledge her own feelings and needs. She never got to be a child; she never got to explore who she was as she grew, and her identity didn't develop as it would have in a healthy family environment. Because her survival depended on identifying and meeting everyone else's needs and feelings, her own development was completely denied.

As an adult, she became drawn to being the caretaker in relationships, choosing partners and friends who ignored her needs because this felt familiar to her. Instead of being assertive, Megan inappropriately took responsibility for other people's emotions and behaviours, whether in work, family or friend relationships, and yet she found it impossible to ask for help herself.

Megan's worth was directly tied to what she could do or provide for others, and, when shown kindness or love, she suspected it wasn't genuine and would be used against her in the future. As a result of her childhood, Megan also had a deep-rooted fear of abandonment and true emotional intimacy, despite the fact that they were precisely what she desperately sought.

Jane (child of the critical parent)

Jane had one daughter and was pregnant with her second. She'd had a difficult time getting pregnant originally and, sadly, lost her first baby at ten weeks after two years of trying. She conceived again three months after that loss and was filled with anxiety throughout the pregnancy. Her labour was long and difficult, not aided by her mother, who was constantly texting and calling to find out what was happening and making comments that made Jane feel as though it was her fault things were so tough. When pregnant for the third time, and in the third trimester, Jane was nervous about labour, and how she would manage her

mother if things were difficult again, not to mention parenting two small children. She was constantly worried that something bad was going to happen and that she was not a good enough mother.

Jane often felt she was drowning and, at times, wanted everything to stop, just to escape feeling that way. 'I feel like I can't switch off,' she explained. 'I promised I'd give my kids a better upbringing than I had, but I worry all the time and question everything I do. I feel totally overwhelmed and exhausted.'

Every time Jane got a moment to relax, she noticed all the things she should have been doing, and felt lazy and ashamed if she sat down when there were jobs to be done. It was like she was looking at the room through her mother's eyes and could hear what her mother would be saying.

Jane described her relationship with her mother as close, but she was confused and hurt because she didn't feel her mother had been there for her when she needed her the most. Jane felt invisible – like her mother didn't care. Her mother was constantly criticising her, whether about her parenting, the state of her house, the clothes she wore, her weight and general appearance . . . she always wanted the upper hand and always found a reason why her daughter's decisions were wrong. As a result, Jane lacked trust in herself and regularly doubted her own abilities as a parent.

Jane's mother was both aggressive and passive aggressive. Whenever there was a disagreement, she turned on Jane aggressively and then ignored her and refused to talk to her for days, giving her the silent treatment. She was emotionally distant, and yet seemed to intrude on every aspect of

Jane's life, judging every decision she ever made and regularly making belittling comments.

Whenever Jane confided in her mother, she would seem empathetic but stored the information away to raise it another time when she wanted to put Jane in her place by sharing her judgement and disapproval and, if she had the chance, letting her daughter know just how inconvenient it had been for her to give her that emotional support at the time. Jane felt she could never do anything right and was always faced with criticism and deliberate misunderstanding. Her mother never respected her privacy and regularly shared her private information with friends and family.

Jane's mother was very good at attacking people (including Jane) and then acting the 'victim', exaggerating her wounded feelings. She would create drama and use problems and negativity to make others feel sorry for her. Jane was blamed for the tiniest of mistakes and her mother would guilt trip her to make her feel less than worthy. She was regularly wronged, mocked and blamed, which led to severe guilt and self-esteem issues as an adult.

Jack (child of the ignoring parent)

Jack was often irritable and angry at home and completely overwhelmed by being a husband and father. He had always felt as though he was different to everyone else, and he didn't belong or fit in. He felt like he had tricked his way

into his job, and if his friends, and even his wife, really knew him, they wouldn't like him.

Jack was a high achiever all his life and worked very hard, feeling that it was his responsibility to provide for his family. He often stayed late at work, despite his wife's constant requests that he didn't. Jack felt as though he was pulled in every direction, that whatever he did was never enough for anyone else and that he was always letting someone down.

After experiencing some mild chest pain, Jack went to his GP (his wife forced him because he 'couldn't find the time') and was stunned to be diagnosed with anxiety and depression. He was very embarrassed that the doctor thought he was so 'weak' and didn't want anyone to know that he was on anti-depressants and anti-anxiety medications – especially not his father.

When Jack was growing up, his father was rarely at home during the week; he would work long hours, often coming back after his children were in bed. And at weekends, he would play golf. When Jack asked if they could do something together, he would dismiss him and tell him to stop nagging. He didn't play with his children, instead preferring to be in his study working.

If they ever did something together, it would have to be what Jack's father chose; he would never ask Jack what he wanted to do. If they watched TV together, it would be his father's choice, regardless of Jack's presence.

Jack's father had high expectations of his children. He required that they excel in school, sports and other areas

and lacked patience if they failed to do so. He rarely provided nurturance or praised them.

Jack's father focused on obedience, discipline and control. He considered it rude or disrespectful if the children answered back and they had to always do as they were told, without question. He never attempted to explain his rationale – the children simply knew the rules and followed them. He punished autonomy and stifled his children's critical thinking. He controlled them by shaming or mocking them, thinking nothing of laughing at their mistakes and encouraging the other children to laugh, too. He also controlled them by punishing them or withdrawing his love. There was never any room for negotiation. He simply wanted them to obey. Jack felt the rules were overbearing and excessive, but really struggled to criticise his dad, feeling he was being disloyal and a 'bad' son if he did so.

His entire life, Jack tried to be what everyone else wanted him to be and, as a result, had absolutely no idea who he actually was. He even worked in the same company his father did before him, because his father got him the job without discussion and expected him to take it.

Rebecca (child of the combination parent)

Rebecca could not remember a time when she felt good enough. She came to therapy confused about who she was, why she seemed to struggle.

When Rebecca was growing up, her mother was hypercritical, invading every part of her life, but also ignoring her completely. Any requests for love or affection were flicked away with dismissal and accusations of being needy or demanding. Rebecca didn't remember her mother ever hugging her as a small child, then felt suffocated when her mother would try to do so when she was a teenager or adult.

When being fitted for her first bra, Rebecca's mother insisted on being in the cubicle, despite Rebecca not wanting her to be. She was forced to write down when her periods were on the family calendar for everyone to see.

Rebecca's weight and appearance were commented on constantly, and never in a positive way. Her mother would choose her clothes and wouldn't allow her to experiment with her hair or general appearance in any way that would set her outside of mainstream conformity.

Nothing was safe from criticism. No test mark was high enough; even when she got 98 per cent in an exam, her mother responded with 'What did you get wrong?'

Rebecca's father left her mother when Rebecca was around five years old. After this, her mother had no qualms whatsoever about badmouthing him, and shamed Rebecca for wanting to be close to him. She would regularly demean Rebecca's father and then compare her to him. She often said things like, 'Your father's such an adolescent!' and in the next breath, 'You're just like your father.'

Her mother drank heavily and Rebecca and her siblings knew to keep out of the way when she did, because her rage

and anger would be on a hair trigger and no one ever knew what would set it off. They all did their best to avoid being in the firing line at these times, by either disappearing or doing whatever they could to keep her happy, whether getting her more drinks or listening to her rant about the topic of the moment.

Rebecca believes visiting her father separately (who did his best to protect her as far as he could) and going to boarding school were her saving grace. Saying that, she still suffered with depression, self-harm, eating disorders, substance misuse, perfectionism, self-sabotage, a lack of identity, hyper-independence and hyper-dependence.

Below are things we would look for when describing a narcissistic parent. Please be aware this is not diagnostic, but, in our experience, it shows at the minimum a very unhealthy toxic parent, who will cause the kind of responses we've described above.

Characteristics of a narcissistic parent

- Highly critical of you, your friends, your neighbours, everything everyone and anything
- Nothing is ever good enough (even if you did what they expected, they would find a reason why it wasn't)
- Self-centred (everything is about them – for example, how *your* mental health makes *them* feel bad)
- Controlling (they want you to do what they want you to do, and shame and disapprove of you for not complying)

- Manipulative (coerce you into doing things you don't want to; use guilt trips to get your time or money)
- Invasive (feel entitled to know everything about you, your friends, romantic life, sexual development)
- Creates drama (especially if there's an event at which they're not the centre of attention; they manage to always bring the focus back to them)
- Unpredictable (you don't know what mood they will be in, or how they will react to a certain situation)
- Invade your privacy (read your diary, go through your things, including your phone, social media accounts, take your door off as punishment)
- Entitled – to time/money/information/grandchildren/emotional labour
- Make every event/thing about them (your wedding, your birthday, your grief, your divorce, your pain – any event where they are not the centre of attention)
- Take ownership of your achievements (if you graduate, they got you there, etc.)
- Overshare personal/intimate information (for example, telling everyone you're pregnant before you're ready or that you're having problems in your relationship)
- Talk to you about emotional/financial/relationship worries
- Play the 'victim' instead of accepting responsibility (for example, if you tell them you're unhappy they shared your private information, they'll say, 'How could you accuse me of being a gossip? I would never . . . I can't believe my own child could say such a thing!')
- Treats you as if you are below them (telling you they know better than you, and know you better than you know yourself)

- Disinterested in your life – unless there is a gain for them (if you get a promotion, they'll ask how much you're being paid to see if they can benefit from it)
- Get angry with you when you are upset
- Ignore your point of view
- Shut down your opinion (especially if you disagree with them)
- Deny events happened that made them look bad
- Use guilt to make you do things for them
- Withdraw affection as a form of punishment
- Blame you when you have an argument
- Shame you for making a mistake
- Refuse to accept responsibility for mistakes/hurtful behaviour
- Tell you you're overdramatic/overreacting/remembering things wrong
- Bring up your past mistakes to avoid taking responsibility for their own
- Act totally different in public from how they are in private
- Control you with a 'look'
- Want to know everything about you and your personal life
- Get annoyed if they're the last to know something
- Worry about what everyone else will think or say
- Act like they're the victim in conflict situations
- Make assumptions about other people's thought processes and intentions
- Refuse to hear the word 'no'
- Have to have the final word – no room for negotiation
- Don't allow you to be angry
- Base your worth on your achievements
- Too fixated on money to enjoy their children
- Use gifts or acts of service to sweep things under the carpet

- Don't accept boundaries
- Apologies are insincere/they justify the behaviour
- Refuse to treat you like an adult
- Stay in a loveless relationship for the children
- Brag about you to friends/family but never compliment you directly

When a client describes a relationship with their parents involving these behaviours – whether some or all of them – we can see that the problems they face now have arisen from that relationship, stemming from beliefs they were taught by an emotionally abusive or narcissistic parent.

So what's the difference between a narcissistic and a healthy parent?

Megan, Jane, Jack and Rebecca all grew up with parents who, through their behaviour, created a set of values and conditions their children had to live by, or up to, in order to feel that they were worthy of love and affection.

While all parents create values and conditions, the difference here is that the narcissistic parent teaches their child that they (the child) are the reason for everything that ever goes wrong in the relationship – they are the root cause of all the difficulties, they are not good enough, they are lazy, selfish, thoughtless, cold-hearted and generally the worst.

Added to that, any time a child complains against these conditions or values, the abusive parent repeats the idea that they are difficult, combative, selfish and demanding; ultimately, that they – the small, defenceless, confused child – are the problem.

Over time, a child starts to really believe those things about themselves, because, of course, why would their parent lie to them? Parents know everything, and they know their child better than anyone else. And the child knows, despite everything telling them to the contrary, that their parent is never, ever the problem.

This leads to them thinking that the reason they feel so bad is not because their parent has hurt them but because they should be stronger. They ought to be able to handle things better. They shouldn't be so needy and demanding. So they start to believe they are less capable than everyone else, that there must be something wrong with them – a failing in them. Most people who have been raised in emotional abuse think that way. They think they have been brought up as 'normal', and there is truth in that, but it is just *their* normal. It doesn't mean it's a healthy normal.

By contrast, a healthy parent teaches their child that even when they make mistakes, they are lovable, wanted and needed, and their value does not depend on what they can do for their parent.

How the child is affected

The child of the narcissistic parent is taught to put everyone else first and consequently feels bad or guilty when they try to stand up or advocate for themselves, leading to a life in which they do everything for everyone else and never believe it's enough. They say yes when they want to say no, and feel frustrated, then, eventually, resentful; and they feel bad for letting people down because they've said yes to too many things. They walk through life always thinking that they are the problem, never considering the possibility that it could be someone else. They feel tolerated, not loved,

and a need to apologise and compensate for their very existence with everyone they encounter.

Once our clients recognise the unfairness and injustice (and how their parents' behaviour has impacted them), they start to understand that they weren't simply weak – it's not that they couldn't cope, weren't resilient enough or were oversensitive; they were a *child*. And, as such, they deserved love, compassion, understanding, patience and kindness.

When we ask them to describe *themselves*, our clients who had narcissistic upbringings generally use some or all of the following terms:

- Selfish
- Ungrateful
- Cold-hearted
- Lazy
- Demanding
- Over-emotional
- Crazy
- Psycho
- Awful
- Horrible

Because for a child, it's easier to believe that they are the bad one, not their parent. We will come back to this – the complementary moral defence – in Chapter 5.

So while individuals' experiences of emotional abuse vary, there are often similarities between what our clients face, both in terms of the internalised beliefs they've absorbed and the trauma responses they've developed to try to stay safe as they grew.

The following are the most common trauma responses we see:

Interactions:

- Finding it almost impossible to say no
- Always saying yes to helping others, even if you want to say no
- Finding it hard to share a differing opinion
- Needing to ask others' opinions before making a decision
- Avoiding conflict at all costs, even if it means you suffer

Focus on others:

- Letting others down because you've said yes too much
- Needing everyone else to be OK so that you can be OK
- Doing everything for everyone, but feeling like nobody does anything for you
- Hating to ask for help because it makes you feel like a burden
- Anticipating other people's needs
- Being able to tell what someone's mood is from the way they move or breathe
- Struggling to identify your own wants and needs
- Being able to defend others but not yourself
- Finding yourself with emotionally unavailable partners
- Hating the idea of someone not liking you

Fear:

- Of failure
- Of success
- Of rejection
- Of conflict

Feelings of guilt and low self-worth:

- Thinking that if you're not being productive, you're being lazy
- Believing you're always to blame when things go wrong
- Feeling insecure or unworthy when others give to you (because you feel undeserving; plus, you don't trust the kindness because acts of kindness have been weaponised against you in the past)
- Trying to prove you're 'good enough' to other people
- Feeling ashamed if you make a mistake
- Never feeling you've done enough
- Holding yourself to a higher standard than you do others
- Feeling guilty for doing something 'indulgent' for yourself
- Feeling you're a bad son/daughter if you criticise your parents
- Struggling to let go and enjoy imaginative play
- Believing that anything less than 100 per cent is failure and not worth doing
- Feeling that you are worthless if you're not helping

'How do I know it wasn't me?'

This is one of the questions we are most commonly asked. How does someone know that their parents' behaviour created these responses in them, as opposed to their own personality and the fact they're just not good enough? Because we know that when you grow up with a certain set of behaviours from caregivers the wounds listed above are responses to this.

So why does this happen? What generates these feelings and beliefs? How do they come about? Through our work, we see how

our clients' narratives arise from a specific type of parent – one who puts themselves above everyone else, who needs to control and dominate everyone around them. In other words, the narcissistic parent, as identified in the list of criteria on p. 17.

What these clients have experienced is trauma. Trauma does not need to be a one-off massive catastrophic event. In fact, the trauma we are referring to can, and does, have a much more dramatic impact on survivors – because long-term exposure to emotional abuse at a minimum causes anxiety and depression, but usually so much more, including forming a relational pattern (the model on which we base our relationships, and what we expect from them) that is carried into adulthood and all relationships therein.

One thing we know for sure and the point we are trying to make here is this: *if you can spot your parent in the descriptions in this chapter, it wasn't you, it wasn't your fault and you weren't ever the problem. They were.*

CHAPTER 2

The Five Main Traits of Narcissism

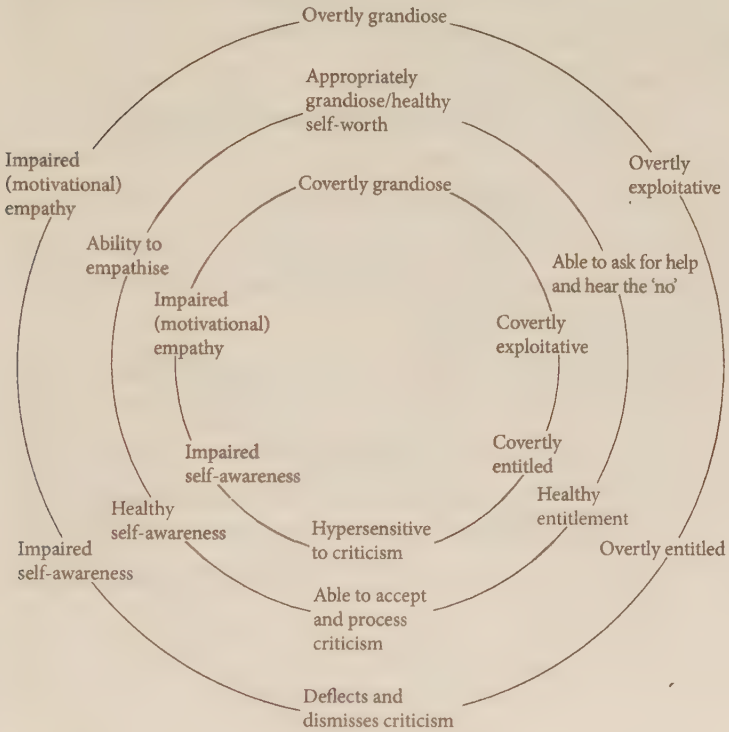
> Megan: 'She thinks she's better than everyone, and we should just give her whatever she wants when she wants it just because she wants it. If we even *think* about saying no, she starts crying and making us feel awful, so we do it. It's infuriating; she sees nothing wrong with it and thinks it's her right as a parent.'

We used to refer to a narcissist as having either covert (hidden) or overt (exposed) traits, but the thinking has moved on and we now recognise that they could have a mix of both. Some of the hidden narcissistic traits are so insidious that unless you know what to look for, you may not realise they are abusive. To recognise all the abusive behaviours, covert as well as overt, it helps to understand the five main traits of narcissism:

- Grandiosity
- Entitlement
- Exploitation
- Motivational empathy
- Impaired self-awareness

In fact, there are more than five traits to look for when making a formal diagnosis of Narcissistic Personality Disorder (NPD), as

illustrated below, but the five main ones are shared by all narcissists, whatever their specific presentation.



The paint palette Helen proposed in her masters dissertation for understanding the difference between healthy, covert and overt narcissism; the inner ring is covert, the outer ring is overt and the middle ring is healthy

It is also important to bear in mind there is such a thing as 'healthy narcissism'. The twentieth-century psychoanalyst Heinz Kohut described it as a driving force that makes us want more for ourselves. Our healthy entitlement, for example, is what makes us ambitious – it pushes us to want a better house or nicer things for ourselves.

Our healthy grandiosity is our sense of self-worth and self-esteem – the source of our belief that we have the right to speak on things we know about or specialise in, just as we are writing this book with a healthy understanding that we have the authority to do so, based on our work and research and education.

The main difference between healthy and unhealthy narcissism is very simply its cost to others. In other words, unhealthy narcissism involves the exploitation of someone else to meet its needs, and the cost to that person can be anything. Emotional pain, physical pain, money and assets are all prices paid by the exploited person for the narcissist's gain.

As well as getting its needs met regardless of the impact on others, unhealthy narcissism believes in the right to something just because it wants it. It also believes in its own authoritative opinion, no matter where that opinion came from. It could be Wikipedia or a news article. Narcissists have little concern for the foundation for their beliefs because they are so convinced of their superiority.

Grandiosity

Grandiosity is the unjustified sense of superiority the narcissist has over everyone else in the world. It's their world and we live in it to serve them. It is a groundless sense of superiority that leads to devaluing others seen as competition:

- 'Oh, I used to have a car like that, but I didn't like it, so I took it back.'
- 'Who do they think they are driving around in that ridiculous car?'
- 'You got a promotion? Goodness, I don't suppose many people would apply for it, would they? Well done, though.'

- 'I don't know why you're making such a fuss about this baby. I just got on with it.'
- 'I wouldn't want a house that big; it's not my style.'

According to the Diagnostic Interview for Narcisissm, someone who exhibits grandiosity:

- exaggerates talents, capacity and achievements in an unrealistic way
- believes in their invulnerability or does not recognise their limitations
- has grandiose fantasies
- believes they do not need other people
- overexamines and downgrades other people's projects, statements or dreams in an unrealistic manner
- regards themselves as unique or special when compared to other people
- sees themselves as generally superior to other people
- behaves self-centredly and/or self-referentially
- behaves in a boastful or pretentious way.

[Source: The grandiosity section of the Diagnostic Interview for Narcissism (DIN) (Second edition). Gunderson J, Ronningstam E, Bodkin A. 'The diagnostic interview for narcissistic patients'. *Archives of General Psychiatry*, 47, 676–80 (1990)]

Rebecca's mother threw an annual summer party. In the months leading up to the event, she forced her children to help with the organising, telling them repeatedly how important the party was and impressing on them that

the consequences of it not going well would be dire. As a result, the children believed it was the social event of the year. She built it up in their minds so much that it seemed more like a garden party at Buckingham Palace than some warm white wine in the back garden. She also made them wear outfits she had chosen especially and serve drinks and canapés and make small talk with the guests, who were three times their own age. The children weren't allowed to leave before the last guest, nor were they allowed to eat anything, in case there wasn't enough for the visitors. And since this was not an occasion for their enjoyment, they were to behave with composure throughout to make a good impression and not be an embarrassment to their mother.

Rebecca's mother was displaying her grandiosity in assuming that her summer party was as important to everyone else as it was to her, and in using her children to demonstrate what a wonderful mother she was.

With grandiosity, we might also see someone who looks down on others, who thinks they're better than everyone else and grossly exaggerates their accomplishments to give credence to their authority.

Grandiosity is an intrapersonal trait, which means it exists within the mind and doesn't need interactions with others. In other words, if the narcissist was on a desert island by themselves, this trait would still be evident.

Grandiosity is the central trait that is fed by all other narcissistic traits, whether the narcissist overtly exhibits it or not. Their misconceived sense of superiority is sometimes referred to as

'magical thinking'. The narcissist will centralise themselves in other people's worlds, making themselves seem more important and convincing others that they depend on them.

Both overt and covert presentations will look to exaggerate abilities and experiences: they're a horse-rider when they've had one lesson; they speak fluent French when they can barely manage 'où est la plage?'. And their fantasies, whether overtly or covertly expressed, will be grandiose, about wealth, power, influence and ability.

The overt presentation, we call 'the big I am' or a 'black catter'. A 'black catter' is someone who brags about what they've done, what they've got, who they know . . . and if you've got a black cat, they've got one, but it's blacker than yours. They've a story to beat yours every time. They know more than you about any subject. They're the life and soul of the party, holding court and largely talking about themselves. A narcissist exhibiting overt grandiosity asserts dominance and 'peacocks' to others to show how much better than them they are. They have the best car, the best house, partner, job, kids (apart from one, obviously – the scapegoat, of which more later – but their 'flaws' are blamed on the other parent or another spurious thing), the best everything. And if they don't – and this is undeniable – they will say, for example, 'Oh, I wouldn't want a house that big; it's not my style.'

Overt grandiosity is typically associated with the wealth and success achieved by the narcissist, and, where there isn't much wealth or success to talk about, there will be stories about lost opportunities, sabotaged by someone or some kind of extenuating circumstances, and they will be the victim.

When grandiosity presents covertly, it's much harder to spot. Instead of making flashy or boastful claims or exaggerating achievements, they respond by devaluing and criticising those they perceive

to have more than them or who threaten or challenge their superiority. 'Who do they think they are driving around in that ridiculous car?' 'Well, yes, they may have got that promotion, but I wonder what they did to get it?' implying that it wasn't gained on merit alone.

The covert presentation doesn't look obvious from the outside, but it's very much there. It manifests as a quiet but scathing judgement of others, often passive aggressively, so the comments aren't easily identifiable.

Grandiosity is also behind the concrete opinions of someone with NPD. Jack's father was a big supporter of a particular political party. He believed anyone who voted differently was idiotic, wasting their vote and didn't understand politics. He believed his opinion was the only one that mattered. If others or his children put forwards a different one or questioned his assertions in any way, there was something wrong with them; they were thick, uneducated, ridiculous, even.

Little can be said or done to challenge their superiority and woe betide anyone who tries – because it is this that provokes the narcissistic rage or 'smear campaign'.

In 2008, Atlas and Them examined how people with NPD responded to those who challenged them/threatened their self-esteem. They did this by staging a critique of the narcissist's presenting skills using a stooge they had placed in the experiment. After presenting, the narcissist was given constructive criticism with clear guidance on how to improve their skills. However, they were unable to hear the criticism and instead devalued and degraded the person critiquing. The study showed that they saw feedback as a personal attack, against which they had to defend themselves, which they did by discrediting the person giving it.

When someone doesn't meet the expectations of a narcissist, they may be met with something known as 'narcissistic rage' – an

emotional response to the disappointment from someone not meeting their demands. Grandiosity sets high expectations, and these will never be met, no matter what. In a covert presentation, the narcissist will look to others to validate their superiority, but regardless of how much validation is offered it will never be enough. The overt presentation will openly dismiss and devalue anyone who is critical or challenges their unrealistic self-perception.

Jane's mother had narcissistic traits that were more often covert than overt. Jane dreaded occasions like Christmas, Mother's Day and her mother's birthday because whatever she got for her mum, it just wasn't enough. She would buy expensive gifts, book coveted restaurants, take her mother on nice holidays, but all in vain. Her mother would still find something to complain about, express disappointment or compare it to something her neighbour had and find it wanting. Jane could serve her mother the moon on a plate and her mother would complain about the dust or ask why she hadn't got the sun. There was nothing Jane could give, buy or do that would meet her mother's need for evidence that she was better than everyone else. If Jane was to challenge that behaviour, her mother would act hurt and sad in response and likely accuse her of making it all up.

Jack's father had more overt traits. When his father bought a new phone, he showed it off to Jack (bragging), but when Jack said, 'Oh yeah, that's the one I used to have; I've got the newer model now,' his father said,

'I didn't want that one. The battery life isn't as good. What's the point of having that one when it runs out all the time? Enjoy charging it every five minutes!'

Jack's father's sense of superiority was challenged by his son having a later, better model than him, so he had to devalue it to feel less threatened. Jack knew, based on experience, that if he then questioned his father's reasoning, he would try again to dominate, and probably explode with rage, telling Jack, as he always did, that he had no idea what he was talking about.

Whenever Jane cooked, people loved her food. But her husband, Tom (who liked to think he was a better cook but wasn't), constantly criticised it. Every time someone complimented Jane's food he would either suggest how it could be improved or try to take ownership by saying he gave her the recipe or taught her how to do the technique she'd used.

Tom presented more overtly than covertly, so thought nothing of criticising Jane's cooking in front of their friends. And if Jane challenged this in any way – for example, contradicting the recipe source or suggesting there was something wrong with her partner's taste buds – he may not have said anything there and then, but would likely let her know that he was annoyed with her with some private indication, and later get angry with her for trying to humiliate him in front of their friends (the challenge would be dealt with privately because Tom had enough self-awareness to know that others

would react badly to it). Completely ignoring, of course, that he had done exactly that to Jane in the first place. He might then have ignored her (stonewalling) for a couple of days, despite her attempts to make peace.

Despite overt and covert narcissists reacting differently to any challenge to superiority the outcome is the same. The narcissist establishes their superiority and asserts dominance, at the same time creating a shame response in their victim should they attempt to be seen as equal in their relationship.

The grandiosity trait is also the narcissist's biggest weakness. In their unwavering self-belief they think no one can get the better of them and this leads to them underestimating their victims. They can't imagine them outsmarting or leaving them, or just generally winning 'against' them. So when someone is trying to survive the narcissist, realising this weakness in them is their biggest asset. They rarely see their victim planning to escape or to hold them accountable, gathering evidence of their behaviour – because they believe they're not capable of it.

Entitlement

Entitlement is closely interwoven with exploitation (below). It is the belief that whatever the narcissist wants, they should have it because they are better than everyone else, and everyone should recognise it, regardless of the cost to anyone else:

- 'Of course you should have told me first. I'm your mother.'

- 'After all I've done for you, I can't believe you would say no to me like that. How dare you!'
- 'I've got some names here to add to your guest list for the wedding. I know you don't know them, but they're my friends so they have to be invited.'

If they want a promotion, they will do everything they can to get it – except earn it the way they should. Entitlement reinforces the sense of superiority we discussed in grandiosity, by saying, 'Well, I must be better than everyone else, because look at what other people gave me just because I wanted it.'

Entitlement centralises the narcissist in everyone else's world. They constantly look to make others meet their needs above and beyond their own. And they have no regard for others' needs because in their world view, those people are there exclusively to meet the narcissist's needs.

> Rebecca's mother demanded that she take her shopping, but Rebecca was working, so she couldn't (never mind the fact she didn't want to). Her mother would either act mortally wounded (covert presentation, weaponising the victim space to make her feel guilty) or furiously angry (overt presentation, using anger to make Rebecca comply through fear). Essentially, Rebecca's mother was demanding that Rebecca dropped everything immediately and met whatever need her mother had, regardless of what she was doing.

There is nothing the narcissist doesn't feel entitled to. It could be money, time, food, energy, sex, company, emotional labour, even

an opinion. If they want it, they will take it or manipulate someone into giving it to them.

Megan's mother thought nothing of taking money from her children. She demanded they each gave her 20 per cent of their income when they started working. Now it's one thing to ask your children over a certain age to contribute financially to the household, but Megan's mother took money from her children when they were twelve years old. She took their birthday money, and, even after they moved out, she used motivational empathy to get her children to give her money, too.

There was a lot going on here in Megan's mother's behaviour, including the parentification aspect, which we will come to in Chapter 6, but in short she was making her children financially responsible for the household, while at the same time sabotaging their attempts to gain independence. She felt an entitled sense of ownership of her children.

So the narcissistic parent's entitlement shows up as ownership, possession, authority over their children's lives and what they do or don't do.

Jack worked in media law in the type of job that meant he brushed shoulders with some important people whom his father admired. His father regularly turned up at his son's workplace when he knew those people would be there, and would introduce himself to them, acting as though he had known them all his life and

generally dominating conversations. It made everyone very uncomfortable, particularly Jack.

Jack had been warned at work that it wasn't to happen again – that he would be in the firing line if his father turned up again; but his father brushed his concerns aside, claiming he was doing no harm and that the important people liked him.

Jack's father felt entitled to what his son had, including his acquaintances – so much so that he was willing to jeopardise Jack's job. He would ask when the influential people would next be coming in, and if Jack said he'd rather not say, he'd respond by laughing, saying things like, 'What's the big deal? I'm just wondering.' And eventually, he'd resort to, 'Who do you think you are? You think you're so important, don't you? As if anyone cares!' Jack's father would belittle, mock, humiliate and devalue his son because he was so angry that he wouldn't give him what he felt entitled to: access to the people he thought worth his time.

As with grandiosity, entitlement will show up differently, depending on whether it is overt or covert. When it's overt, it will be obvious. It will be someone turning up uninvited to a party and muscling in or someone demanding an upgrade to first class on an aeroplane, arguing loudly about how often they fly, talking down to the staff when they are denied. It's as though the rules don't apply to them and they can do and take anything they want. It'll be passing off someone else's work as their own and placing themselves in positions of power they have no right to be in, just because they want to. It might even be the partner who cheats on their spouse because the partner said no to sex or booking themselves a

week away with their friends without discussing childcare responsibilities. Ultimately, it's just taking or demanding what they want and expecting to get it, regardless of the cost to anyone else. And it's easily seen.

Less easy to see, as ever, is the covert presentation. For example, 'I wish I was going to the party you're going to, but I was forgotten.' When it's covert, entitlement relies heavily on motivational empathy (see p. 41) to get the need met and we see a lot of weaponising of the 'victim space'. The narcissist is unable to meet their own need, so they'll make someone feel sorry for them to get what they want.

Exploitation

Taking resources belonging to others, regardless of the cost:

- 'Of course I've kept her birthday money – I need it to pay bills.' (Exploiting money.)
- 'Why can't you take me to the shops? It's not like you've got anything better to do.' (Exploiting time.)
- 'I want you to send your husband round – I've got some shelves that need putting up.' (Exploiting skills/relationship/time/energy.)

Exploitation is heavily intertwined with entitlement, but essentially it's using others for self-gain, whether financial, assets, social status, skills, emotional support – just about anything. Even a tragedy can be exploited – say, using a death either to get close to someone or get sympathy and therefore attention and whatever else they're looking to gain emotionally, financially or otherwise.

There are extreme cases of children being exploited by narcissistic parents, but typically it exists insidiously on a much smaller scale. It could be exploiting children for their time or skill, for example.

Rebecca was well known as the 'techy' one. Her mother would constantly demand that she drop everything and help fix her phone or computer or give her instructions on how to use an app. When Rebecca started to understand this, she would suggest her mother looked it up on YouTube or Google, which was met with a response intended to shame and punish Rebecca. 'Oh, never mind. If you haven't got time to show your own mother, I'll just go without.'

In this instance, Rebecca's mother was exploiting her daughter's skill not only to get the thing fixed, but also to pull her into rescuing her. She was using motivational empathy (see p. 41) to make her daughter feel obliged to help, asserting control through fear, obligation and guilt, exploiting her to meet a number of needs – fixing her phone, reassuring her that she was the most important thing in Rebecca's life – and creating an opportunity to remind her daughter that she was responsible for how her mother felt.

When Jane lost her first baby, her mother told all her friends, and every year posted a status on Facebook about the baby, using the situation to elicit sympathy. She talked about the pain of never meeting her

grandchild, but rarely mentioned her daughter in the conversation. Jane repeatedly asked her to stop doing this, but her mother always snapped back with 'It happened to me, too! I lost my grandchild, too!' Jane's mother exploited her daughter's tragedy and made it her own, regardless of how this hurt.

The point is exploitation doesn't have to be enacted on a grand scale to have an impact. It's the intent that's important – using others to meet a need of some kind, regardless of the cost to the victim. It's insidious, but it's also where we can start challenging our own responses to the narcissist.

We can follow Rebecca's lead and start to say no, face our feelings of fear, obligation and guilt and remember that the only people who get angry with our no are the people who would benefit from our yes.

Motivational empathy

Weaponising somebody's empathy against them to either avoid accountability or force them to do something against their will (we might call it 'guilt tripping' or 'pulling on heartstrings'):

- 'I know, I know . . . I'm just the worst person in the world. You're so much better than me.'
- 'Gosh, this is such a lovely coat. I would really love it for the winter, but it's just too far out of my budget . . . '
- 'You don't need to keep going on about it. I feel bad enough already. I was never good enough for you; this just shows it.'

It's often thought that narcissists don't have any empathy, but they do – it's just very different from healthy empathy. Empathy is a fairly complex subject but essentially, there are three main types: cognitive empathy, relative empathy and motivational empathy. Cognitive empathy is the ability to understand or predict how someone may feel or react in a given set of circumstances. This is the type autistic people have difficulty with. (It's a misconception that people with autism simply lack empathy. Whereas they struggle with cognitive empathy, they have tonnes of relative empathy, which is feeling the same feeling as someone else. Autistic people have a tendency to experience relative empathy in overdrive, which is partly why they feel so overwhelmed by large groups of people.)

Motivational empathy is where our empathy makes us take action. It is used all the time and is all around us. For example, charities use it in their promotional material to encourage donations – showing an image of a starving or neglected child, say, appeals to our empathy, motivating us to take action.

Motivational empathy pulls on our fear, obligation and guilt, demanding we meet someone else's need, usually above our own. Which is fine if we have a choice and we are 'allowed' to say no. In the hands of a narcissist, however, motivational empathy becomes a weapon. They'll use it to manipulate. To get their own needs met, they will use someone's empathy against them. They will also use motivational empathy to deflect responsibility.

If Jane tried to explain to her husband that something he had done or said made her feel bad, he typically reacted with: 'I know, I know, I'm just the worst person in the world! You can do so much better than me.' This made Jane feel bad for him, and instead of receiving the

emotional support she sought, or Tom taking responsibility, she ended up reassuring him that he wasn't terrible and she loved him. So having heard that he'd hurt her, he used motivational empathy (by weaponising her empathy for him against her) to make her feel guilty and obliged to assure him he was a good person.

Rebecca's mother used motivational empathy to solicit money from her adult children. On the family chat group, her mother would send messages such as, 'I've just had my electricity bill. I guess it's beans and candles for me, haha!' The children then fought over who would pay the bill. Not only did they feel it was their responsibility, they also saw paying their mother's bill as a chance to be the golden child – for a while.

A narcissist uses motivational empathy with their child from day one. When they say, 'If you don't do that, Mummy/Daddy will be sad,' they are asking the child to ignore their own feelings to make the parent feel better. They are also telling their child that they have power over how their parent feels, so that the child assumes a sense of responsibility for their parent's feelings – an understanding that seeps into all of their future relationships. They feel as though they have unlimited power over everyone's feelings and, as a result, they need to avoid doing or saying anything to upset people, and if they do they must fix it. They don't recognise that a) holding someone responsible for behaving badly is not mean, and b) unless we are deliberately hurting or shaming someone, we are not responsible for how they feel.

For example, if Rebecca said to her friend, 'I didn't like it when you laughed at my outfit the other night,' she wasn't shaming her friend, she was sharing how her friend hurt her through her behaviour and without being mean or rude she was just holding her friend accountable.

But if Rebecca said to her friend, 'Ugh, you're so annoying, you never stop going on about trains, it's so boring,' she was shaming her friend and belittling her. If she wanted her friend to stop continuously talking about trains, she could say, 'I love that you love trains, but they're not really my thing. Could we talk about something different please?' and then change the subject. If her friend kept talking about trains, then it would be up to Rebecca to decide whether or not she wanted to be in that relationship. She didn't need to shame or belittle the friend because she didn't like the topic of conversation.

To reinforce their child's sense of obligation to prioritise their parent's feelings, the narcissistic parent uses emotional abandonment, commonly referred to as stonewalling. Stonewalling is the primary way the narcissistic parent weaponises their child's fear, obligation and guilt against them, which is what motivational empathy works on: fear that they won't be loved, or will be rejected, punished/shamed/humiliated; obligation to meet the demands of the narcissist for fear of feeling all those fears; and guilt that they have negatively impacted their parent through not meeting their demand. So their empathy is used to motivate them to meet the parent's demands (i.e. weaponised against them).

Rebecca described running up to her mother with a picture she had drawn for her when she was around five years old. She was so excited to show Mummy, bursting with pride

and joy, fizzing with energy. Imagine how she felt when her mother said, 'Do stop going on, Rebecca. It's only a picture; you've done them a thousand times.' Rebecca was confused at first, and then embarrassed. She felt the sting of rejection flush her cheeks and tears prick her eyes. Her mother's only response was to roll her eyes and call Rebecca a drama queen. Rebecca never gave her a drawing again.

Megan recalled going to see her aunt and having a lovely time. She returned home to her mother and cheerfully said, 'Hi, Mum!' only to be met with a stony silence. Megan had no idea what she had done wrong, and the silence lasted for days. Her mother barely said a word to her, just left Megan feeling confused and wrong-footed over whatever mistake she had made. She replayed the events of the previous few days in her head and realised her mother was angry that she had spent time with her aunt – because her mother considered Megan to be 'hers' and if Megan had other relationships separate from her mother, it was seen as a huge betrayal.

The fear that emotional abandonment generates in children is so intense that they will do whatever it takes to avoid it, in this case prioritising their parent's feelings and ignoring their own. That fear then drives the obligation and guilt they feel in adulthood when saying no in all their relationships. It becomes their relational pattern, dictating their behaviour, based on the understanding that saying no to someone will lead to abandonment.

Motivational empathy is one of the most important concepts to understand when we are trying to heal from the impact of narcissism. Once we recognise that empathy is weaponised against us, to silence and manipulate us into meeting a narcissist's needs, and used by them to avoid taking responsibility for behaviour, we can understand what is happening, learn not to enable it and speak up for ourselves.

Impaired self-awareness

An inability to self-reflect and understand how their behaviour impacts others:

- 'It's not my fault you feel that way.'
- 'I don't know why they've cut me off. They had a perfect childhood.'
- 'If you've got a problem with me, that's your problem, not mine.'

It's often assumed that narcissists have no self-awareness, but this is not the case. What they have is impaired self-awareness. This means they have enough to modify their behaviour, but not enough to heal or change it. If a narcissist sees they've done something to upset you, they know they have a range of behaviours to distract you from challenging them or holding them accountable. They might use motivational empathy to make you feel bad ('I know, I'm terrible. I just get it wrong all the time') or superiority to gaslight you ('Oh, for God's sake, why do you always have to ruin everything with your moods? It's so petty and pathetic'). But the narcissist lacks sufficient awareness to be able to self-reflect and recognise how their behaviour is problematic. Instead, they use self-awareness to manipulate and control.

But doesn't that suggest there is an intent behind their behaviour? Yes, it does – and this is about the abuse that they've inflicted: the fact that on some level they understand what they are doing and why. Impaired self-awareness in the overt presentation is documented as an acceptance of behaviour but externalising the blame. For example, when Jack once confronted his father and told him he was a narcissist, the response was: 'So? It's got me to where I am today, what's the problem? If you've got a problem, that's yours not mine, I'm perfectly fine.' Jack's father was aware that he had narcissistic behaviours but didn't care and was even somewhat grateful for it.

On the other hand, if Jane was to suggest to her mother that she was a narcissist, with her tendency towards the covert presentation, her mother would likely be terribly wounded and hurt by the suggestion, deny all accountability and say she tried to help everyone, that she was a good person and ask how Jane could say such a thing. She would sit back into the victim space, horrified that anyone could suggest she was anything other than a model of a human. And confronted with evidence, she might explain it away, blaming stress or others' behaviour. 'Nothing I do is ever good enough. I've dedicated my life to raising you, and this is how you treat me. Nobody else thinks like that, it's always you. You need help!'

What Jane's mother would not do is stop and think about what she did that made her daughter believe she was a narcissist. And that's the difference. Where Jack's father might have accepted he was a narcissist, he was not going to reflect on it, and consider how his behaviour hurt others. In fact, he would revel in it, thinking it was a positive thing. And Jane's mother would be horrified by the accusation, but again, instead of reflecting she'd cast blame and devalue Jane in her response.

Self-awareness in narcissism is like a shallow puddle – deep enough for the narcissist to understand how to use behaviours to control, dominate and deflect, but not enough to understand how their behaviours could severely wound those around them. Conversely, in an emotionally healthy person, self-awareness would be more like a lake, with depth enough for exploration.

Narcissistic Personality Disorder (NPD) is about front-and-centre positioning – being the most important person there is. Not only in the narcissist's own eyes, but in everyone else's, too. This is why narcissistic parents are so damaging. They leave no room for anyone else, unless they are propping up the narcissist and meeting their expectations, needs and demands. And should the narcissist's child try to step away and into their own autonomy, they will be met with shame, humiliation, punishment, rejection and abandonment.

CHAPTER 3

What Made Them a Narcissist?

> Rebecca: 'I know she had a rough childhood, too, but wouldn't that make her more aware not to do it? Why is she like this? Why did I turn out so differently? It makes no sense!'

Created by the Roman poet Ovid, Narcissus was a character who fell in love with his own image. He loved it so much that he couldn't tear himself away from it, not even to eat, and eventually he starved to death. Echo was another character in Ovid's poem about Narcissus in his *Metamorphoses*. She was a river nymph whose punishment for being a chatterbox was a curse that left her able only to repeat back what she heard. She fell in love with Narcissus but, alas, since he was only interested in loving himself, he rejected her. She then faded away and all that remained of her was a voice repeating what it heard.

So the concept of narcissism comes from the idea of someone being totally in love with themselves, and Echo represents the partners of narcissists whose existence and identities are eradicated, until they only repeat the things the narcissist says.

But why does narcissism develop? This is such a difficult question to answer because it tends to provoke empathy, guilt, concern and sadness in our clients. There are a few different theories,

but they're largely all saying a similar thing: that NPD or pathological narcissism comes about as a result of childhood trauma from primary caregivers. But what we say is that while we can have compassion for *how* someone develops Narcissistic Personality Disorder (NPD), we do not have to tolerate the behaviour.

A whistle-stop tour of narcissism theories

Otto Rank published one of the earliest descriptions of narcissism. He called it this because he noticed a client group who were obsessively self-centred, much like Narcissus. In the early 1900s, Sigmund Freud said that every infant is born with what he called 'primary narcissism' because a baby demands that their needs are met instantly by their caregiver. Their drive to be fed, held, cared for, means their needs are met above anyone else's. And they're not even aware of the needs of others. It makes sense, really. A baby doesn't care whether or not their caregiver has slept. They're going to cry until they're fed. Their very survival depends on their primary narcissism.

As a baby grows and develops, they start to learn there are other people in the world to connect to and that they are separate from these others, and so they learn to wait for their needs to be met, though continually test the boundaries as they develop and learn how others relate to them. Essentially (in a healthy environment), they grow out of this primary narcissism as they learn to self-regulate and that they are separate individuals and can meet their own needs, too.

What we now consider NPD is what Freud called secondary narcissism. He felt that narcissism was an inherent part of the ego, but noticed a client group who didn't connect to him in the same

way that other clients did. He described this group as grandiose, charming and friendly – the type of person who was great to be around and someone you would want to be in charge. He thought they were likeable people who made great friends. Which is a little worrying, to be honest.

Freud explained secondary narcissism as what happens when a child experiences unreciprocated love as they learn they are a separate individual; they turn that love back into themselves and, as a result, develop NPD. To put it simply: when a child is rejected, abandoned, unmirrored, abused by their parent or caregiver, they learn that they must fall in love with themselves, just as Narcissus did, in order to feel accepted and acceptable in the world.

The narcissism conversation then went a bit quiet until the 1960s, when Heinz Kohut and Otto Kernberg started talking about it again, separately, but at the same time.

Kernberg is an object-relations theorist and Kohut a self-theorist. They argued a lot about things like the importance of aggression in the development of NPD, and especially about how to treat it. Because Kernberg's views were more aligned with Freud's and Melanie Klein's (a hugely important contributor to object relations theories), his descriptions and suggestions were more readily and widely accepted, and Kohut, as the new kid on the therapy block, got somewhat ignored. When it came to creating diagnostic criteria, these were largely based on Kernberg's description and, in 1980, NPD appeared for the first time in the *DSM-III – The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (the handbook used by healthcare professionals in the United States and much of the world as the authoritative guide to the diagnosis of mental disorders – although it must be noted the *DSM* is considered problematic for many reasons, which we want to acknowledge).

Today, however, we align more with Kohut. He describes people with NPD as mirror hungry, because they didn't get the mirroring required in childhood to develop a healthy sense of self. People with NPD are looking to see themselves reflected back by others with adoration and adulation to compensate for the complete lack of that in childhood, and they will punish anyone who doesn't do so to the level they demand – one that is impossible to sustain.

Kohut said NPD develops as a result of abuse and trauma in childhood from the primary caregiver(s). It might look like sexual, physical or emotional abuse. It might also be severe emotional or physical neglect. But one thing that often isn't included when discussing the development of NPD is the smothering parent.

We mentioned the engulfing parent in Chapter 1. This type of smothering can create NPD, too. When a parent hovers over a child and doesn't allow them freedom to explore the world, they don't get to learn from their own bumps and bruises (physical and emotional). Where they aren't safely given the opportunity to learn they're able to self-soothe, solve their problems or meet their own needs, they don't develop a healthy a sense of self. They don't know where their edges are because they aren't allowed to develop any, and they're always being caught before they even know they're falling.

The smothering parent is also likely to tell the child how wonderful they are and will avoid their child's anger by not holding them accountable for mistakes or unkindness, for example. This again means that the child doesn't develop boundaries and learn how to take responsibility. Instead, as they grow, they continue to believe that everyone will meet their needs as a priority, just as their parent has, and thus become very entitled. How is a child meant to accept they're less than perfect if they're told they're

perfect all the time? This is exactly why it's so often the golden child (more about which in Chapter 7) who develops NPD.

Kohut described NPD as a developmental arrest, and when we look at the narcissist's behaviour and compare it to that of, say, a three-year-old, this seems fairly reasonable: the tantrums, the demands, the illogical arguments and the boundary testing, the disregard for social rules and so on. The difference being that a three-year-old learns and grows, whereas the narcissist doesn't.

The experiences that lead to the development of NPD will need to be extreme and sustained, and there's talk of there being a genetic element, but that hasn't been established at the time of writing.

Kohut said that to be able to self-love, have self-esteem and self-worth, we need a good 'self'. We need to be able to know that we are good enough as we are, that we are OK and safe in the world. We need to have a good identity and knowledge of our boundaries, preferences and values.

We get that from a 'good-enough' parent: one who validates emotions and experiences, helping their child to learn from, rather than punishing their mistakes; one who is reliable and available; one who may leave, but their child can trust they'll always comes back. A parent who sees their child as an individual, encourages autonomy and shows them they don't need to be perfect to be loved – they are lovable just as they are. Ultimately, where there are unhealthy boundaries and projection, it always denies a child's autonomy. It might not be enough to cause NPD, but it will still leave identity wounds.

So a child growing up with a parent who is very unsafe, unreliable and untrustworthy isn't going to build a healthy sense of self. They won't know they are OK in the world just as they are, so will need a coping mechanism to deal with this. And one extreme

coping mechanism is NPD. It's thought to be a very disorganised attachment style, meaning the sufferer is extremely insecurely attached to their caregiver. They are anxious and avoidant (turning away from, rather than towards connection with people), needing others to provide what their parent should have given them in childhood and seeking it in toxic and damaging ways as a result.

It's desperately sad; it's heartbreaking that NPD develops due to the level of trauma a child has experienced in very early childhood. A small, helpless child who had no power and no way of defending themselves, so had to use NPD to exist. And that's the bit that drives our clients to empathy and compassion and feeling guilty for being so angry about the behaviour exhibited towards them.

It's not dissimilar to all the coping mechanisms our clients themselves develop to be OK in the world – to feel safe in relation to other people and things. There's one massive difference, though. Our clients come to us wanting to change; they accept responsibility for their behaviour, even when it brings with it serious shame and humiliation. They fight every day for an emotionally healthier way of living. They care how their behaviour impacts those around them, and they are accountable, through awful shame and pain. They stand at the coalface, trembling with fear, terrified to look – but they stay there anyway, to dig out the things that hurt them, and those around them, despite the emotional labour.

The narcissist would never do this.

The narcissist is unable to self-reflect. They are self-aware enough to know that if they do X + Y, then Z will happen, but they aren't able to look at themselves and think, Yeah, I shouldn't have done that. I should apologise. They'll always find a reason to blame everyone and everything else, whatever the circumstances.

And so we come full circle, back to where we started this chapter: we can have compassion for the trauma, but we do not need to tolerate the behaviour. No amount of trauma justifies one person abusing another.

Social and historical context

We also need to consider social norms and historical contexts when looking at why there are so many narcissistic parents.

Each generation has its own approach to raising children. If we think back to the Victorians, children were seen and not heard. In the working classes, children were sent to work at a young age. Many of us will have seen the pictures of five-year-old chimney sweeps. There were huge abuses shown towards children by today's standards, and they were completely normalised.

The ripple effects of different parenting approaches and theories can still be felt today. For centuries, children have been viewed as possessions, chattels to be traded for better social ranking and material wealth. Children from wealthy backgrounds were raised to further advance the family's status and protect its name. Every family was pitching for the top spot. Parents exploited their children constantly and this, too, was absolutely normalised.

Now let's throw the patriarchy into the mix: men raised to believe they're superior and entitled, based on their owning a penis; women raised to obey men and to be compliant and silent and dominated. Here again, these things were normal and normalised, and still exist today.

Parenting styles in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries relied on denying autonomy and weaponising shame. The social norms of ignoring or 'training' babies, using abandonment and

stonewalling as punishment, while generally normalising abuse, meant that, according to Kohut, we have the perfect conditions to create narcissism. Stereotypical gender norms mean that men are more likely to have overt expressions of narcissism, while in women they will be more covert. Men are socially permitted to be flashy, demanding, entitled, superior and to show off their 'wonderfulness' for all to see. Women, of course, are (or at least were) expected to be demure, contained, 'modest', agreeable and compliant.

This is why we see so many people with narcissistic parents. They're not imagining it – we've cultivated the ideal social environment for narcissism to flourish.

Prevalence of NPD

There's a wide variety in estimation of prevalence, with 0.5–1.6 per cent of the population having diagnosable NPD. However, cases of NPD tend to fly under the radar; someone with the condition is highly unlikely to put themselves in the way of diagnosis because they are aware, to some extent, that they will be identified – and, of course, they don't want to risk that because it would mean they're not a perfect specimen of humanity.

What's more, those diagnosed with NPD are typically at the far end of the scale – an example being the American serial killer Ted Bundy. This leads to a misconception that for someone to have NPD, they need to be behaving at an extreme level, but that's not the case. There is a spectrum or sliding scale of NPD. It is highly likely – and indeed considered by many clinicians – that the actual incidence of NPD is much higher than generally estimated.

Intent vs impact

Often, when asked to take responsibility for their actions, someone with NPD will respond with something like, 'Well, I didn't mean it like that,' as though this exempts them from responsibility. However, it doesn't matter what the intent was – it's the impact that's important. *The person who did the hurting does not get to say whether or not it was hurtful.*

There is a boundary with this. We are responsible for our reactions and feelings and making sure that we are aware of any emotional wounds that might be triggered by someone else's behaviour. For example, if my friend has coffee with a mutual friend and doesn't invite me, that might feel like rejection because of my exclusion wound. But it isn't rejection – it's my reaction to that wound that I have to manage. However, if this happens repeatedly, that might well be rejection and needs to be addressed. Now, if someone is hurt by being held responsible for their behaviour, those are *their* feelings to manage. But the narcissist will use motivational empathy to deflect accountability, saying things like, 'You're right. I'm a terrible person.' This is not taking responsibility – it's asking someone to rescue them from their feelings.

Does someone with NPD mean to hurt the people around them? Well, sadly, it would seem so. There's evidence to show that what differentiates NPD from other personality disorders from the same section of the DSM-5 (cluster B), such as borderline personality disorder, is deliberate intent to cause harm to significant others.

This is something that our clients struggle with intensely. They can't believe someone would willingly hurt them. And our response, then, is often: 'Well you can't imagine treating anyone like that on purpose because you never would.' When a person is

kind, compassionate, empathetic and mindful of how they leave others feeling, they can't imagine wanting to hurt someone. But we know it's possible. We know there are people in the world with bad intentions. We see it all the time in the news – people stealing, vandalising, abusing and deliberately hurting others.

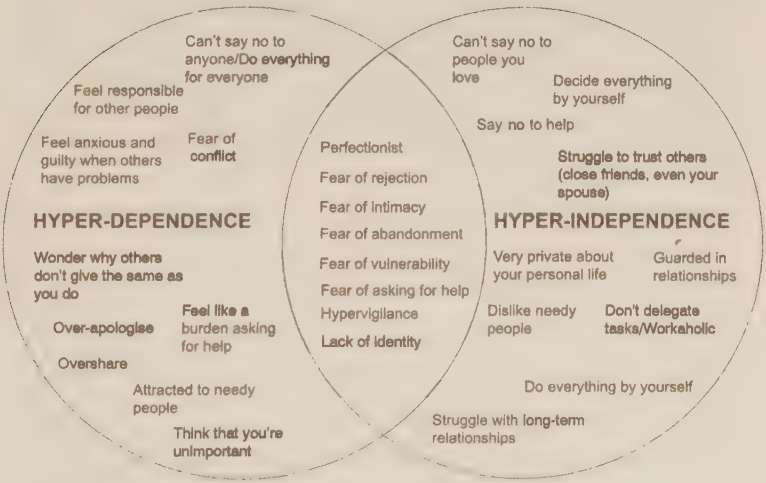
Sometimes, though, it's so distressing to accept that a person we love and care for could purposely hurt us that we try to understand and explain it away. It's deeply painful to process this intent to wound us, but it's vital that we do. Usually, when we are trying to understand why they do it, we are trying to understand how we can tolerate it better.

Perhaps it also allows us to avoid the conflict and consequence of confronting the behaviour, too – because it's too painful to cope with the fallout of accepting that, even though the NPD was born of dreadful trauma, there is still no excuse for anyone to abuse us.

CHAPTER 4

How They F*ck You Up . . .

Jack: 'There doesn't seem to be a part of me that isn't touched by all this. My whole personality seems to be a trauma response at this point. It makes me so angry they did this to me. I never stood a chance.'


Can't say no to anyone/Do everything for everyone
Feel responsible for other people
Feel anxious and guilty when others have problems
Fear of conflict
HYPER-DEPENDENCE
Wonder why others don't give the same as you do
Over-apologise
Feel like a burden asking for help
Overshare
Attracted to needy people
Think that you're unimportant
Perfectionist
Fear of rejection
Fear of intimacy
Fear of abandonment
Fear of vulnerability
Fear of asking for help
Hypervigilance
Lack of identity
Can't say no to people you love
Decide everything by yourself
Say no to help
Struggle to trust others (close friends, even your spouse)
HYPER-INDEPENDENCE
Very private about your personal life
Guarded in relationships
Dislike needy people
Don't delegate tasks/Workaholic
Do everything by yourself
Struggle with long-term relationships

A multitude of wounds are created by the narcissistic parent, but, ultimately, they can be separated into two camps: hyper-dependent and hyper-independent. The term hyper-dependent is one we have created to encapsulate co-dependency and people pleasing under one umbrella, as they describe the same experience and behaviours.

Hyper-dependent and hyper-independent

Most people think they fit into one or other of these two categories. However, those with restricted emotional growth typically develop both types, sometimes with one being more obvious than the other and sometimes alternating between the two in equal measure.

Hyper-dependent

Jane: 'I do everything for everyone else and listen to all their problems. I just want everyone to be happy or I can't relax – but it hurts so much when they don't do the same back. It's like I'm not important and no one really cares, even though I'm always there if they need me. I just wish someone would put me first for once.'

Jane was always focused on other people's lives and problems. She was the fixer and would jump from one friend or family crisis to the next, repairing as she went. Through her upbringing, she was conditioned to anticipate people's needs and tended to drop her own plans to help others – something on which she prided herself. She was driven by a compulsive sense of duty and could not bear to see someone in pain. She always felt it was her responsibility – her duty – to help. When Jane found her friends or family suffering, she felt compelled by empathy and compassion to rescue them and ease their pain.

Jane was extremely kind and generous, but her kindness was not boundaried, so people often took advantage. Despite

wanting to be put first, Jane felt highly uncomfortable with anyone doing for her what she did for them. It's the paradox of the people pleaser: desperately wanting the love and support they show others, but feeling unable to receive it. Jane never asked for help in return, as she perceived others' lives as being more important and didn't want to annoy or burden them, although she sometimes desperately wished someone would help her without her having to ask.

Through her behaviour, Jane was seeking external validation to confirm that she was a good person – that she was worthy of love, respect and affection. Jane relied excessively on approval; so much so that other people got to decide her worth. As a result, her behaviour was geared towards always trying to make others happy. Jane felt responsible for everyone else's wellbeing and emotions and was unable to be happy unless they were.

Hyper-independent

Megan: 'I mean, the car got towed – what was the point of calling anyone? I just had to get myself to the pound and get it released. Why would I need to bother anyone for that? That's what buses or taxis are for. I could even walk if I really needed to. What's anyone else going to do?'

Megan was very sociable but could never say she had a 'best friend' – someone she could turn to if she felt low or in crisis. Asking someone for help or support was the very

last thing that she would do, despite being surrounded by people.

She kept people at an emotional arm's length, which made her appear cold and standoffish, but actually she found it very hard to trust and depend on anyone else. To do so put her at huge emotional risk. She felt like a burden, obligated to anyone who helped her and sure that, at some point, the help would be weaponised against her.

Megan believed that others would think her weak if she asked for help, and so she always found a way to manage alone. If she really needed help, she would pay someone for it. She felt she dealt better with problems alone and only shared with friends once the crisis had passed and she no longer needed the support.

In relationships, Megan struggled to let people get close to her, but those who did manage to get past the barriers were firmly 'in', and Megan was loyal to a fault. Unfortunately, loyalty in this instance did not mean healthy relationships, but instead, much like Jane, she was afraid to challenge, disagree with or criticise, for fear of rejection or abandonment.

In therapy, Megan deconstructed what she mistakenly thought was loyalty and found it was in fact FOG: the combination of fear, obligation and guilt. *Fear* that when someone stuck around long enough to see the real her, they would leave – perhaps by choice or in some unfortunate accident, but either way, ultimately, they'd abandon her. *Obliged* to anticipate and meet their needs. *Guilty* if she

said no and put herself first, because she should be grateful that despite the fact that she'd shown her true self, they had stayed (although she hadn't actually shown her true self, but more on that later).

It's not that Megan consciously put others' needs before her own; it's that she honestly believed she didn't have any. She felt independent and strong, but also couldn't live up to the expectations she set herself. So the house was never clean enough, she wasn't a good enough friend/partner/colleague. With anything that had a standard, Megan would feel she was failing in some way. To add to the confusion, she often felt almost superior to other people, despite not feeling good enough, which she came to understand as being a way to protect herself from the power of others to hurt her. She thought expressing her own needs amounted to moaning or complaining, so she shut down her emotions to protect herself.

Megan was scared to let anyone get close to her because to do so meant losing herself to them. She was protecting herself by keeping everyone away and never depending on anyone. To be close to someone felt suffocating, as though she had to sacrifice her whole way of being to meet their needs and avoid rejection.

Jack: 'What's the point in talking about problems? You just have to get on with it. No one else can sort your life out; you have to do it yourself. It's just self-pity and pathetic to moan about stuff. Suck it up and stop whining.'

Jack could best be described as an island. An island he fiercely defended from others and himself. Jack didn't like talking about himself. Instead, he avoided it by focusing on asking people lots of questions about themselves. To cope with social situations, which he found exhausting, Jack took cocaine to boost his confidence. At first, this was recreational, but he started using it at work for a boost before a big meeting, and sometimes just because he needed to focus.

Jack viewed himself as the provider. It was his responsibility to provide for his wife and children, no matter what. He worked long hours, often getting home after his children had gone to bed, and leaving before they were up. He was adamant his wife should not go back to work. He felt she shouldn't have to, believing it would suggest that he wasn't doing enough for his family, like a 'proper' man. He was very invested in what it is to be a man. He frowned on men who showed emotion and was horrified by the idea of talking about his feelings. He only went to therapy because his wife threatened to leave him if he didn't.

Jack was frequently irritable and angry, snapping at his family when they did something the 'wrong' way. He thought in black and white terms and got frustrated when his children questioned his methods or didn't do as they were instructed. He was completely disconnected from his emotions; he didn't know how to feel them, let alone name them. And he was completely disconnected from himself, too. All he knew was that he was repelled by emotions, regardless of whose they were.

Jack protected himself from rejection and abandonment by deflecting attention away from himself and on to others. He separated himself from emotion – whether his or others' – because it threatened his feeling of safety. He learned very young that emotion was dangerous, and that if he showed it, he got punished, shamed and humiliated by his father, or it was used as a way for his mother to suffocate and intrude on him.

Alternating between hyper-dependency and hyper-independency

Rebecca: 'I can be the centre of attention and still feel completely unseen. I just feel different to everyone else, like they get something I don't. I can't keep a relationship or even a friendship, and if I do, they end up being so toxic it's awful. I don't feel like a solid being; it's like I have no edges, and I merge into everyone else. I do everything for everyone, but no one ever thinks to do anything for me. I shouldn't have to ask for it, they should just know.'

Rebecca was always surrounded by people. At school, she was in the popular group and made friends easily. But despite all the people around her, she always had a nagging sense of loneliness. If her friends were to describe her, they would say she was confident, fun and funny, the life and soul, generous and kind, the sort of person who would do anything for anyone and would drop everything to help

someone in need. They would call her independent, strong, able to cope with anything, unafraid of standing up to people and defending her friends with fierce loyalty. But what they might not have noticed was that she couldn't stand up for herself.

They would also say that despite the laughter and fun, there was a sheen of sadness, but it wasn't something you would mention to her. That sadness was only noticed when Rebecca thought no one was looking and her mask dropped. She never asked for help and laughed it off when others remarked on how much she achieved. It was almost a point of pride to Rebecca that she could move furniture alone and single-handedly assemble flat packs that indicated two people were needed.

However, she often felt she was in a bubble, walking around the world together with yet separate from everyone else. She was confused by the ease with which others seemed to share space and experience, how they knew the unspoken boundaries between each other, where the invisible lines were for jokes. She felt excluded even when she was being included and loath to ask for guidance.

Rebecca was an 'oversharer'. When she met new people, she readily told them everything about herself. Nothing was secret. In fact, she felt guilty if she left anything out. She formed quick, tight bonds with people – intense relationships that went from zero to 100 overnight, from first meeting to spending all her time with them. She became heavily invested in the relationships, whether romantic or platonic, and they usually revolved around her helping

someone, and them being dependent on her. She was always devastated and bewildered when the relationships inevitably disintegrated and the other person drifted away without explanation.

Part of her oversharing was to prevent rejection. When rejected, Rebecca experienced toxic shame, feeling so disgusted and repulsed with herself that she was almost suicidal. By telling people everything about herself at the outset, she was attempting to control what they thought about her, fearful that, if they formed their own opinions, they would see she was really a terrible person, evil and rotten to the core. So she tried to protect herself by telling them what to think.

Romantic relationships seemed beyond her grasp. And when she finally did form a romantic connection, it was so toxic and emotionally abusive that it ended with the police being involved and a conviction against her partner. She wasn't sure she'd ever been in love. She was suspicious of anyone who was attracted to her or made it clear in an honest and authentic way that they liked her. She described it as being repulsed by them.

Rebecca presented with an equal mix of hyper-dependency and hyper-independency. She needed other people to give her praise, approval and validation to feel like a valuable person. While it looked like Rebecca shared a huge amount of herself, in reality she was only sharing what she wanted other people to see. She did this by being the entertainer at parties but avoiding deep conversations, or by sharing all her trauma stories to explain her behaviour, but

laughing it off, deflecting attention away from her pain. By focusing people's attention on very specific parts of herself, she avoided letting them see the parts she was ashamed of, and so never felt truly connected to anyone because she never revealed her full self.

When it comes to helping our clients change their emotional responses, what they find most challenging is becoming aware of the behaviours that serve their hyper-independency/dependency and recognising that these stem from when they were young, when their only understanding of families came from their own. It was impossible for them to question their upbringing at the time. They were not in a position to recognise their situation as abusive and, since they were completely dependent on their parents for all their basic needs, like food and shelter, they did what they needed to survive, which meant developing their armour of coping mechanisms. And this *did* help them survive – which is important to recognise. Because even though their coping mechanisms might be hurting them now, for a while this armour kept them safe.

Toxic shame

The most important thing to understand is that every one of these trauma responses is rooted in shame – not lovable, not good enough, offering nothing of value to the world. If we could see past the shame, we would see that if someone rejects us or treats us badly, 99 per cent of the time it's about them, not us.

Shame is an emotion that helps us behave in a socially appropriate manner. It is not a natural emotion – it is taught, and looks

different in every culture around the world. For example, in some cultures, having children outside of marriage would bring shame on the entire family, while in others it's now completely normalised. In the UK, it would be seen as shameful to fall asleep at work, but in Japan it's seen as an indication that you're working so hard you need to sleep.

Shame is something we feel when we behave immorally, improperly or dishonourably. It was crucial to our individual survival when, at the start of human existence, we needed a tribe to be able to live. That tribe would have had a code of conduct, rules to live by, and if someone broke them they would be exiled, and likely to die as a result. So shame was really, really helpful back in the day. These days, to survive socially, it makes us reflect on our behaviour, making sure it is in line with social expectations and norms. However, shame can also be used for control.

In the narcissistic family system, shame is weaponised from the moment a child is born. Babies are labelled 'good' or 'bad', as though their cries for food, comfort and being kept clean are an intentional attack on their parents' parenting. A toddler who knocks over a cup of juice is met with anger, irritation and comments on their clumsiness and how much work they have caused their parent. The four-year-old who doesn't want to share the sweets in their party bag is told they're selfish and mean. The eight-year-old who fails their spelling test is called lazy or stupid, and told that they've disappointed their parent. The twelve-year-old who wants to go to the cinema with their friend instead of their parent is accused of being hurtful and odd: 'What's wrong with you? How could you do that to me? Where did I go wrong with you? What did I do to deserve a child like you?'

Jack clearly recalled the day he failed the grammar-school entrance exam and spent the whole day worrying about what his dad would say. In the end he hid in his bedroom and pretended to be asleep. Regardless, his father came in shouting at him for being stupid and a failure. Jack clearly remembered his father's words ('I'm embarrassed, and all the men at the golf course will be laughing at you for being too thick to get in') and how he wanted to disappear and never have to face those men again. Years later, when he raised this, his father laughed, 'Ha! You were such a wimp about it. I was trying to toughen you up, teach you to be a man.' At the time, Jack didn't realise he was feeling shame. He just knew he felt scared, sad and embarrassed for failing something that everyone else seemed to do easily. Imagine his shock when he discovered that his father hadn't passed the entrance exam either.

And so it goes on: shame being drip-fed into a child via responses that tell them they are useless, that they never get it right and they disappoint. Shame is repeatedly used to condition children to meet their parents' needs and expectations above their own. Over time, this develops into what is known as 'toxic shame'.

The difference between shame and toxic shame is that 'normal' shame (the one that helped us survive the Stone Age) lasts a few hours, maybe a few days, and gradually dissipates. It's an appropriate response to wrongdoing that any healthy person may feel. Toxic shame, on the other hand, is a deep-rooted chronic feeling of worthlessness. It makes someone feel disposable, unlovable, the worst person in the world. It controls every aspect of

their behaviour, both in public and in private. It dominates relationships and is stirred every time one of those messages from childhood is confirmed. For example, when someone doesn't get the promotion they applied for, instead of feeling disappointed and sad about it (i.e. the healthy response), they feel shame that they're not good enough, shame that they were rejected and shame about what others will say. They feel they are eight years old again, having failed their spelling test.

Shame belongs to other people. We feel it when we consider what others would think about our behaviour. For example, if Rebecca spilled a drink at home, she'd think nothing of it – she'd simply clean it up and go about her day. If she spilled a drink at a friend's house, she'd apologise, help to clean it up and carry on, maybe slightly embarrassed. However, if Rebecca spilled a drink at a posh dinner with the King, she would experience toxic shame (whereas someone with a healthy sense of self and worth would be able to laugh it off and the embarrassment would soon pass).

When we spill the drink, we are looking at ourselves through the lens we were given in childhood. But the lens that the narcissistic parent gives their child is warped. It's broken. It's clouded and doesn't show a true picture. The narcissistic parent's lens gives their child a view that shows them in the worst possible light. Only the narcissist would view them that way, and only so they can control and dominate their child through fear of shame.

A healthy parent would respond to their eight-year-old spilling the drink with, 'Oh dear, never mind, it's only a drink. Shall we get a cloth and clean it up?' And if the child was particularly clumsy, regularly having accidents and struggling with co-ordination, they might look into whether there was something else going on, like dyspraxia. In any event, the child would grow up to recognise that

mistakes are part of being human and can be learned from, giving them power to grow.

Shame is an emotion that many cannot identify or have not identified and we find that one of the biggest moments in healing is smashing that lens of toxic shame and recognising that shame only exists when we judge ourselves through the eyes of others and not our own. When it comes to challenging shame, one of the most helpful practices is to think: if you wouldn't say it about someone else, why say it about yourself?

The FOG

For anyone who experienced a childhood in which emotional or physical safety weren't consistent, stable and predictable, fear, obligation and guilt (FOG) will be the dominant emotions controlling their behaviour and decision making. These are the feelings the toxic parent weaponised against their children to dominate and control them, forcing them to meet their needs above their own.

In adulthood, the FOG descends, takes hold and overwhelms the child of a narcissistic parent: the fear is their fear of rejection, of abandonment, of shame; obligation is their sense that they must meet the needs of others above their own; and the guilt is what they suffer when they do not or cannot meet those needs.

The FOG drives all the behaviours that protect against feeling the toxic shame that is taught in early childhood to coerce and control.

Fear

Our primary drive as human beings is to survive, whether physically or emotionally. That means we need a warning system to let

us know when our survival is threatened, and that warning system is fear.

Fight, flight, freeze and fawn are the four main survival responses to threatening situations. We absolutely need these to save us from things that threaten us physically and emotionally. Someone who grows up in a healthy environment will have good access to all four responses: they can fight to stand up for themselves, say no and hold healthy boundaries, flee to leave an abusive or dangerous situation or relationship, freeze to pause and wait it out until it is safe to move again or fawn to apologise appropriately and temporarily accommodate others without sacrificing themselves.

However, when someone grows up in an emotionally abusive environment, where threat is ever-present, they end up stuck in their trauma response – whether fight, flight, freeze or fawn. It crystallises around them and becomes part of their identity as they grow – that armour against repeated attacks on their entire selves.

When the wasp enters the room

When a wasp enters the room, the fighter will react aggressively, looking for something to kill it with, prepared to do whatever it takes to eradicate the threat.

Someone who is in flight response will get as far away from the wasp as possible – so when it enters the room, they are the person who will tip the table over in their hurry to get out, staying away until it has gone.

The person in freeze will stay as still as a statue, perhaps imagining themselves elsewhere, so they don't think about the wasp. They don't flinch when it comes near them, trying

> to be invisible in plain sight, remaining immobile until it flies away and they can get to safety.
>
> The person in fawn will stay calm and try to catch the wasp. They may tempt it with some sugar water before releasing it, telling any others in the room how great wasps are and that nobody gives them a chance – all the while, still removing it.
>
> The point of each response is survival in the face of a threat. Each reaction is trying to achieve the same thing – not to be stung. And each helps us to survive brief exposure to threat. The problem occurs when that threat is not brief but ever-present, as in the case of emotional abuse.

The brain perceives emotional and physical threat in the same way, and so it responds to them the same way, too – with fear. The amygdala (the area of the brain that controls emotions) identifies the threat and tells the hypothalamus (a part of the brain that controls many bodily functions, including the release of hormones) to activate the sympathetic nervous system, stimulating the adrenal glands to release the hormones that prompt the body into action. Those hormones are cortisol and adrenaline. Short-term exposure to cortisol and adrenaline refines the senses and speeds motor reactions, but long-term exposure annihilates the immune system and the memory and affects every organ and tissue in the body. It's why we see a higher incidence of autoimmune and chronic conditions in our client group.

So physiologically, long-term exposure to trauma has a devastating impact, but it's important not to overlook the behavioural one, too. When we get emotionally stuck in our trauma responses, we are not thinking with our rational, logical brain. The amygdala

hijacks the rational brain, so that instead we act (it's not a conscious process) with our survival brain. This means that fear of rejection, abandonment, conflict and shame (and anything else) clouds rationality and informs behaviour. It is no longer possible to separate the threat from the person, so the assumption then is that everyone is a threat, just like the narcissistic parent. Therefore, all relationships and situations are approached in the trauma response, rather than our safe state (our parasympathetic nervous system – calm and regulated – i.e. the opposite of the trauma state).

When a child grows up with a narcissistic parent, they become stuck in their fight or flight responses and often mistake these for their personality.

Megan came to a session complaining of exhaustion. Emotionally, she felt better than ever, but physically, she was drained like nothing she had experienced before. Because, through therapy, Megan was no longer relying on her trauma state to function in life, her body was no longer relying on cortisol and adrenaline, and she was experiencing a huge adrenaline crash. She was beginning to understand the impact her adrenalised trauma state was having on her body: 'I just feel empty, completely wiped. I've never experienced anything like it. I'm just sleeping every chance I can.'

As Megan came out of her trauma state, her body asked for rest and peace. To help herself, she slept as much as she needed and tried to eat well and exercise to allow her body the best chance of recovering from the constant flood of hormones.

The narcissistic parent takes a black and white approach to their child being 'good' or 'bad'. When the child makes a mistake, the parent treats that as a personal attack, as though it was carried out with intent, projecting on to the child their own motives and intentions. The narcissistic parent will shame the whole child for making a mistake and make global statements about them as a human being. Instead of saying '*that's* bad', they'll say '*you're* bad'.

The not-good-enough wound

Eventually, the child learns to believe they are inherently bad; they feel unwanted and start to feel intense shame about it. Because the narcissistic parent relies so heavily on emotional and physical abandonment for control, their child becomes hypersensitive to rejection. And every time they are rejected, it's confirmation that they're not wanted and it's the worst feeling ever. Tangled up with shame, it creates the not-good-enough wound. Then, every time they encounter something that resembles rejection, it opens that wound and pours salt on it.

Micro-rejections

Rejection by anyone for the child of the narcissist is confirmation that they are everything their parent has been saying about them. It means others agree with the parent, and it feels like no matter what they do, they will never be good enough. Rejection can come in many forms. Some are obvious, like being dumped by a partner or not getting a promotion at work, but there are less obvious micro-rejections, too – things like seeing two friends having coffee together without you, someone declining an offer of help, someone you know not saying hello to you at a party. These are really subtle forms of rejection, and you might try to convince yourself you are overreacting, but in reality, your hypervigilance (more on

this below) means you are hyper-aware of them, and they sting just as much.

Jane liked to help everyone and anyone she could because it made her feel wanted and needed and, most importantly, valued. It gave her meaning and purpose – it was almost her lifeblood in terms of emotional survival. So when Jane offered to help a friend with party preparation and they declined, she was devastated. She couldn't see it as the friend saying no to the help; she felt they'd said no *to her*, as a whole, interpreting it as 'you're not wanted or important'. She felt shameful for even offering in the first place, beating herself up and berating herself for being foolish enough to think her friend would want her there.

Rejection is something we have to make peace with. Ninety-nine per cent of the time when a person rejects us, it's more about them than it is about us. We need to recognise that someone exercising their autonomy is nót confirmation that we are not lovable or wanted. It might just be that their requirement to meet their own needs is more important to them at that time. When someone grows up in emotional abuse, however, they begin to interpret a 'no' as a rejection of their whole self, rather than just the issue in question.

Hypervigilance

Hypervigilance – born of prolonged exposure to threat or fear – is best explained as being perpetually on high alert, aware of everyone and everything in your surroundings. Like a deer listening for a predator,

someone who is hypervigilant is permanently in a trauma space, constantly listening, looking for and anticipating potential threats.

They are aware of absolutely everything, but particularly other people – everything they do or don't say, their breathing, the way they move their bodies, the turn of a head, the closing of a door. There is nothing the hypervigilant doesn't notice, but they often don't realise they're taking it all in. They just respond to the environment, the signals, whatever is going on around them, without knowing that they are making adaptations to their own behaviour. Hypervigilance develops when a person has to learn to anticipate another's behaviour in order to keep themselves safe, whether in childhood or in adulthood.

We often hear our clients refer to themselves as 'empaths'. However, what they call being an empath, we call hypervigilance. When someone calls themselves an empath, they're implying they are born this way, and, while we know there are many people who would disagree with us, we've yet to meet an 'empath' who hasn't had significant trauma, whereby their safety depended on their ability to predict others' moods and behaviour. When someone calls themselves an empath in this way, they deny their own trauma, and also, potentially, the autonomy of others by assuming and projecting thoughts, feelings and behaviour. (For more on projection, see pp. 95–8.)

Hypervigilance can be a very useful skill when it's boundaried and respectful of autonomy. It's often said that children of narcissists are extremely good at sales because they're so attuned to others and can anticipate their needs. It must be boundaried, however, so that it doesn't overwhelm them as they become so aware of someone else's emotional experience that they start to feel responsible for that person's feelings. Another by-product of hypervigilance is that because it assumes someone's emotions, it

can also silence them and leave no space for that person to verbalise their feelings.

Constantly tense, on guard and exceptionally aware of their surroundings, hypervigilant people automatically tune into their surroundings, whether that involves others or not, assessing for danger and potential escape routes, which makes public spaces and large groups particularly exhausting for them. They often experience extreme fatigue after such events without realising why.

> Rebecca could always tell it was raining from the light shifting in the office, without even looking out of the window. She noticed a change before anyone else did – every sight, smell, sound around them, a change in temperature, in light, in air pressure. Sometimes this was helpful – like the time she realised the light switch was about to catch fire because she noticed the heat as she walked past it, before there was a flame or even a smell – but mostly, it was exhausting being tuned into her environment in this way all the time.
>
> She would notice when someone needed the milk passed to them or a pen before they even realised themselves. She would step out of the way on the pavement before the person coming towards her had even noticed her. If someone paused mid-sentence to ask for something, she would guess what it was, filling in the blanks and volunteering to do whatever it was without thinking about what it might cost her.

Hypervigilants are highly attuned to the emotions of others, their tone of voice, facial expressions, tension in the body, the weight of

their footsteps, the pace of their speech, the inflection in their voice. This develops when a child can't trust what their parent says; when they are not reliable and predictable – stable, even. A child growing up in that environment learns to 'read' their parent's non-verbal cues. They must attune to their breathing and movement. They must predict their mood in order to stay safe. They learn when to use fight, flight, freeze or fawn (although the chances are, they will never fight because that would be far too risky emotionally). They will have to tiptoe around their parents, constantly going the extra mile to keep them happy, just to maintain the harmony needed for their own feeling of security and connectedness to the parent.

Megan's hypervigilance left her on guard and distrustful. She was watchful and wary when meeting new people. This could come across as standoffish and uncaring, but it was her survival response to protect her from anyone getting too close. She learned that when someone said they loved her, they ended up hurting and disappointing her. Speaking of her mother, Megan said, 'I can predict what mood she's in just by the way she's breathing. I know what she's going to say before she even says it. It's like my brain is on alert all the time, like playing chess, only I need to be two steps ahead, and if I do the "right" move, she'll be happy with me and then maybe she won't be so cold and heartless towards me.'

In a healthy child–parent dynamic, when the child can emotionally rely on their parent and reasonably predict their behaviour, the child can essentially relax, have time to be a child, explore their world, make mistakes without being shamed and feel safe in the

way their parent communicates with them. However, hypervigilants look for the concealed messages, the warning whispers that tell them danger is present or imminent. They look for the hidden meaning or underlying agenda behind people's words.

Hypervigilance is there to protect the child from the threat of emotional abandonment from their parents. Narcissistic parents are both aggressive and passive aggressive, and in passive-aggressive mode they need only sigh or give a shaming look to convey anger or disapproval, making the child rack their brain, trying to guess what they did wrong. This experience will make a person extremely aware of others' behaviour to help them predict attack – in other words, hypervigilant.

When Jane got home after seeing her friendship group, her hypervigilance left her constantly analysing their conversations – what she'd said and hadn't said, how her friends responded to her, their facial expressions or tone. Were they mad at her? Had she talked too much? Jane could tie herself up in knots for days and it was exhausting. This often caused her to reach out to her friends for reassurance; they were happy to offer this, but became resentful when they had to do it a second and third time, leading Jane to confirm the narrative that she was too much.

Even in happy times at home, hypervigilance is still there – because the child knows the happiness won't last. They know that if anything goes wrong or isn't as the parent thinks it should be, their mood will change from joy to bitterness, contempt, rage or violence, the child being the placeholder for their anger. So the child

lives on high alert, knowing that anything could set their parent off at any time.

> Jack blended in and morphed with people he perceived to be better than him. This led to unfulfilling and meaningless relationships because nobody got to know and connect with the real him. Jack's hypervigilance also kept his wife at a distance because he was scared that she'd get too close. He was trying to protect himself from a deeper loss and hurt were she to leave him.

The child becomes what they think their parents want them to be, trying to meet standards that tend to be unrealistic and ever changing and leading to them live in survival mode, disconnected from their true self.

Critical inner voice

We develop a critical inner voice for fear that we will make a mistake resulting in rejection, shame or punishment. The voice is built on fear, obligation and guilt (FOG), and is used to protect us from making the mistakes that can result in toxic shame.

Early in their development, children are taking in the verbal and non-verbal cues of their parents, learning how to behave and what they need to do to gain the approval to have their attachment needs met. They quickly learn the difference between a parental look of pride and one of disgust and will do anything to avoid the latter. However, it is impossible to meet the unrealistic expectations of the narcissistic parent. Therefore, acceptance and approval are always out of reach.

Jack: 'Even when I got 91 per cent in an exam my father tutted, shook his head and looked at me with contempt.'

Rebecca: 'My mother is *never* happy. She is *constantly* putting me down – how I drive, how I spend my money, what I wear . . . The other day, she even told me I was peeling carrots the wrong way!'

Children need to be seen by their parents to know that they matter, their views count, they are heard. When a parent is unable to attune to the emotional needs of their children, they abandon them emotionally. But the child's brain does not understand that their parent cannot meet their needs and love them in the way they require, so they work overtime trying to achieve the impossible.

To ward off the parent's rejection and emotional abandonment, the child embraces a model of perfectionism to try to win their love, praise and approval. If they can do that one thing right, then, maybe, *maybe*, their parent will love them; if they can just become helpful enough, kind enough, clever enough, pretty enough, flawless enough . . . their parent will finally accept them. Sadly, this does not happen, and the child concludes that they are fatally flawed and unlovable – and not *because of* their mistakes but because *they are a mistake.*

Desperately trying to win their parent's approval, in a bid to protect them against making the mistakes that lead to rejection, the child's inner critic overdevelops to become toxic. In adulthood, it leads to striving for perfection, reminding them of every tiny mistake they've ever made. Self-criticism then runs on overdrive,

preventing others, even their loved ones, from seeing their mistakes for fear they, too, will reject and abandon them.

Lack of identity

Identity is what make us 'us'. It's our values, our likes, our dislikes, our boundaries, our preferences, our interests and our beliefs about the world. In a healthy childhood, exploration of these things is encouraged. Children get to experiment. Maybe they try drawing and painting. Maybe they try music. They essentially play and discover what they connect to. This helps to establish their interests, likes and dislikes. They're able to identify feelings of curiosity, joy and excitement, as well as disinterest, boredom and disappointment, and they do so without fear of admonishment from their parent.

When it comes to discovering their boundaries and preferences, they use the magic word 'no' – one of the first a child learns – and it is this that communicates the boundary, the request to stop. Conversely, a person can compromise their own boundaries by saying no when they mean yes, as much as saying yes when they mean no. Either way, they abandon themselves when they don't honour their true wish in response to a request.

When it comes to establishing what they want from relationships, a child learns that from their parent, by using 'yes' and 'no' initially, and then being allowed to say, 'I don't like it when you . . .' without shame, rejection, punishment or abandonment. All these experiences help them to learn who they are, what they like, what they don't like and how to use their critical thinking.

But the narcissistic parent doesn't allow this. Instead, they project on to a child what *they* want them to be, getting angry if the child steps out of the box they've been shoved into. The child then learns to hide the parts of themselves that anger the parent

and don't align with what the narcissistic parent wants them to be. They learn that these parts are undesirable and attach shame to them, knowing that to reveal them would mean abandonment. The problem here is that those parts are the things that make the child uniquely them. They are parts of their own identity (not the identity the narcissistic parent has created for them) and by hiding them away and slowly disconnecting from them, they eventually forget who they are entirely. This is why children of narcissists feel hollow. They struggle to answer basic questions about preferences and with making decisions. They have no idea who they are.

Rebecca remembered being at McDonald's with her family when she was about eight years old. Everyone was choosing what to eat. When it was her turn, she felt completely overwhelmed and didn't know what she wanted. Then the teasing started. The others mocked her indecisiveness and then her mother got angry. 'Just pick something, for God's sake – we haven't got all day! Why are we always waiting for you?' Rebecca blindly chose, trying to swallow down the fear and shame, as well as the tears.

She'd been struggling to choose because she never knew what she wanted and panicked about making a bad choice. With every second that passed, the pressure grew stronger, until she was paralysed by indecision, frozen in fear.

A lack of identity contributes to being controlled by the FOG, leading to the use of trauma responses as hooks for our identities instead. People refer to 'my anxiety', thus making it part of them instead of separating themselves from it. They hide behind their

trauma responses – because without them, they don't know who they are.

They also rely on others to validate them. They can't rely on their internal judgement system, so need others to tell them that what they are doing is good, that they are working hard enough, that they are good looking enough, that their choices and decisions are sound. They seek reassurance that they are OK in the world because they can't know it for themselves.

When someone grows up with their identity not being nurtured, they look to others to tell them who they are. The narcissistic parent exploits this uncertainty, telling their child they are bad and selfish whenever they try to separate themselves from the image that has been projected on to them. Then, when they do something well, or get a promotion, they believe that they've manipulated their way into it. They think they've tricked everyone and that if people knew the 'real' them, they wouldn't think of them in the same way.

Spoiler alert: they haven't tricked or manipulated anyone.

Another consequence of not having a firm identity is becoming a chameleon, where someone adjusts to fit in with whoever they're with. This may involve matching another person's energy, essentially mirroring them, and maybe even taking on their accent when speaking to them. They hide the things that make them 'them' because the risk of rejection is so high. They worry they will lose people by being who they are. And it makes sense, really – because that's what they've been taught since birth.

One of the greatest things you can do for healing is to start building identity. This entails finding your no, your yes and your edges and starting to trust your perception and feelings.

Obligation and guilt

As explained earlier, fear, obligation and guilt (FOG) are the three main emotions that are weaponised by the narcissistic parent. We have covered fear here; we will discuss obligation and guilt in the next chapter.

CHAPTER 5

Childhood Coping Mechanisms: How Narcissistic Parenting F*cked Up Your Relationships

Jane: 'It's the same in every relationship I'm in. I end up being taken advantage of because I can't say no. I can't criticise anyone, I'm far too scared. I don't just mean partners, but also friends, colleagues. It's the same. I wish I could just say no . . .'

Most of our clients come to us feeling disconnected and lonely – outsiders looking in on a world they can't work out how to join. All the coping mechanisms they developed to survive their childhood in a narcissistic family system prevent them from forming connected, intimate relationships with others – because sharing their thoughts, feelings or needs with their narcissistic parents would have led to shame, punishment and abandonment. So it amounted to emotional risk – a danger that taught them to protect themselves by not sharing and to build their defence of coping mechanisms.

All the experiences leading to these coping mechanisms are described as trauma. Trauma comes from the Greek word for wound – and a narcissistic parent creates deep, lasting wounds.

The child of a narcissistic parent learns to attune to their behaviour so as to predict it, thereby protecting themselves.

Emotionally abusive relationships depend on one person being silenced and unable to speak up for themselves. In a parent–child relationship, this is woefully easy for the parent to establish because the child is so scared of being abandoned and so readily believes that they are the problem that the parent can exploit this to their advantage. This has a devastating impact on the child's emotional development, leading them to adopt a number of survival strategies (coping mechanisms) to prevent abandonment, rejection and shaming.

The child is raised believing their narcissistic parent is the sun and revolves around them, staying warm where they can, trying to keep the parent happy – because if they don't, the parent will explode, leaving the child in the cold and dark. When they reach adulthood, their coping mechanisms lead to them replacing their 'sun' with someone else who is like their parent. If that person is toxic themselves, they will easily step into that role, and the now-adult child or survivor will think it's completely normal; they may even be suspicious, bored, uninterested, possibly even repulsed if the person doesn't want that power over them.

The survivor centralises the person they are in relationship with (whether friend, colleague, partner, etc.) to their thinking and behaviour – anticipating their needs, making sure that they're OK all the time (and if they're not, feeling responsible for fixing things) – almost using them as a behavioural compass to know which way to go. They will do everything they can to keep that person happy, to prevent them from abandoning them, meaning they completely sacrifice themselves.

Instead of sharing their internal experience, they tell people what they want to hear. They hide themselves (see loss of identity in previous chapter) to avoid being rejected. In this way, their coping mechanisms begin to perpetuate the hurt and loneliness

experienced in childhood. That is why it is so important to identify these strategies and let them go, because, unlike the child, the adult has the agency to leave unhealthy relationships.

Hyper-dependents and hyper-independents (see pp. 60–8) may experience all these trauma responses. Although Megan, Jane, Jack and Rebecca's behaviours look different, they're all protecting the same wounds – the not-good-enough, not-lovable, not-wanted wounds.

Trauma responses and coping mechanisms

The distinction between coping mechanisms and trauma responses is that we develop coping mechanisms *to cope with* the trauma response. So the trauma response might be fear of rejection, while the coping mechanism is people pleasing.

Fear of abandonment

Every time a child does something that contradicts the expectations or demands of the narcissistic parent, they will be shamed, humiliated and emotionally abandoned or stonewalled (given the silent treatment). The fear this creates in a child is monumental. Remember, for a small child their parent is their whole world, and their need to know that their parent loves them and will provide safety and security is more important than anything else.

What all this means is that they will do *anything* to avoid abandonment, and the narcissistic parent weaponises this to control their child and force them into doing or being what they want them to be. A child growing up in that environment will be living on tenterhooks, waiting for and anticipating things that may result

in abandonment or rejection – and when they do inevitably come, it is hideously painful for the child. It's also scary.

When we feel fear, our brains trigger a physical response, sending adrenaline into the body to protect us from the threat. For a child, the threat of loss of attachment is as real as the threat of a physical attack, and the child will go out of their way to prevent that. And the only way they can do so is through the appropriate survival response – fight, flight, freeze, fawn – which, in turn, becomes a coping mechanism in future relationships. When a child is emotionally threatened, they have no control over it, no idea how long it will last or how to make it better. All they know is that their safety and security are gone, and they want them back. So they squish their feelings down and do whatever they can to make their parent happy, calm and no longer a threat.

> Whenever there was conflict between Jane and her mother, her mother responded by getting angry and then stonewalling Jane for hours, days, weeks or months, until Jane did enough to prove she was sorry, or until Mum needed her daughter to do something for her, so sent a gift and acted like nothing had happened. As a result, in her adult relationships, Jane didn't say anything when she was upset with someone and was scared to say no to them in case they got upset and abandoned her as her mother did.

So fear of abandonment in adult relationships looks like someone not speaking up for themselves, not contradicting people they care about, not prioritising their own needs, or even asking for them to be met. When they start healing this wound and start saying no,

people are often overwhelmed by guilt. They feel like the worst person in the world for doing so, describing themselves as selfish, self-indulgent, greedy, demanding. They often wonder if it makes them a narcissist themselves.

The same applies here for both hyper-independents and hyper-dependents, the only difference being that the hyper-dependent will be this way with everyone they ever meet, whereas the hyper-independent will only feel it with people they are very close to.

Assumption

In order to believe the world is safe and they are safe in it, a child needs emotional and physical predictability and stability from their primary caregivers. However, the narcissistic parent is neither predictable nor stable, and their children respond in their emotional development with hypervigilance, trying to understand what is or isn't being said and why. By analysing things that were or weren't said out loud, they can start to guess what someone is thinking or feeling about them, and then anticipate their reaction or response, without asking directly, thereby avoiding that thing we all love to hate – conflict – and keeping themselves emotionally safe and protected.

This is assumption. And it's a completely normal human behaviour. It helps the brain to save energy by filling in the blanks for new situations using similar ones from past experiences. It helps to keep us safe, by showing us things that were threats before, and warning us to keep away from them. This is all well and good, unless it overdevelops in response to a lack of predictability and stability in childhood.

Over-assumption is a coping mechanism we learn to make other people feel safe – because we feel responsible for their emotions, and if

they are safe, we are safe. We use it to understand others' behaviour – to predict it, even. We look for signs that they're angry with us, going to reject or attack us. What that looks like is overanalysing things that have happened or been said to try to rationalise and make meaning of them, so we can resolve things in our heads without having to face the conflict of the situation or ask for our need to be met directly.

When Rebecca asked her friend to meet for a coffee and the friend said, 'Sorry, I'm busy. Another time, maybe,' Rebecca didn't think much of it, but subconsciously noticed the word 'maybe'. A few days later, Rebecca asked again and the friend replied, 'I would love to, but I'm just up to my eyes at the moment.' Rebecca started feeling a bit rejected and hurt but tried to ignore it. She didn't want to make a fuss. It wasn't until she asked a third time and the friend replied, 'I just can't at the moment. I'll be in touch,' that Rebecca started trying to make sense of why she wouldn't meet her.

She looked back at the text messages, trying to read between the lines, trying to understand. She thought back to the last time she saw her friend – what they'd talked about, what was said. Had she said anything to upset her? She looked at her friend's social media to see what she'd been up to. It was like a punch in the gut to see she had been for coffee with another friend. Over the next few days, she turned herself inside out trying to work out why her friend was angry with her. She thought of everything, but avoided doing the one thing that could solve it all: sending a text saying, 'Have I upset you?'

She wanted to work out what was going on because the idea of confronting the situation was awful. It felt the same as when her mum used to ignore her when she was little, angry with her for some unknown reason. Rebecca was trying to find a way to fix the situation without the conflict, because not only was she assuming what her friend was thinking and feeling, she was also projecting on to her the way her mother behaved when she was little. Stopping assumption is hard, but it is critical for the healing process. Ultimately, it's about boundaries, which we will explore later in the book, but for now the thing to remember is that it is a survival technique.

Assumption can be very helpful for making someone feel in control and safe in a situation like Rebecca's. She used it to try to stop her mother abandoning her, because to challenge her mother, in any way, meant total abandonment. What that can also mean, however, is that conflict is terminal to relationships. In a healthy relationship, conflict is about resolution; but for Rebecca, it didn't strengthen relationships – it ended them. So of course, she did everything possible to avoid it. She didn't want to face losing someone she cared about.

Assumption also centralised Rebecca to her friend's thinking. It didn't allow for her friend to be dealing with a sick relative, a crisis at work or any other thing that might occupy her time.

Notice how her friend tried to set a gentle boundary with Rebecca by explaining she was really busy and would be in touch, but Rebecca's fear and panic overwhelmed her and

caused her to reach out repeatedly, only to be rejected twice more. Rebecca almost forced the thing she was scared of into happening – a self-fulfilling prophecy – so it was over and done with. She self-sabotaged because she was sure she would be abandoned, and waiting for that to happen was almost more painful than the reality of it happening. Sometimes when Rebecca experienced being abandoned, she felt relieved, and strangely safe. Because her narrative was confirmed and what she knew to be true was true – that is: everyone abandons her. Unfortunately, Rebecca was unable to see her part in this – how she co-created the situations. If she had, she would've been able to change it, and start moving forwards into healthy relationships.

Projection

Projection is a term typically used to describe a behaviour that people use to displace their own actions, intentions, emotions or personalities to protect themselves. It's most obviously seen in something like bullying – if someone is constantly picking on, ridiculing and teasing another person, it might be clear that they are projecting their own insecurities on to their victim to protect them from exposure. Projection in narcissism is no different – the narcissist projects emotions, intentions, motivations and even an entire personality on to their children, and others around them.

Projection is closely linked to assumption, but whereas assumption is filling in the blanks of someone else's behaviour, thoughts and feelings, projection is casting intention or emotion on to them, either because they're behaving in a way we've experienced from others before or because we are hiding from our

own feelings, thoughts and intentions by suggesting they belong to someone else.

'Projection is confession' explains part of what projection is rather beautifully. Narcissistic parents do this a lot. They project on to others their own behaviour. It's projection that explains how the family roles form, which we will discuss later (see Chapter 7).

There are different types of projection. Neurotic projection is where we project negative thoughts and beliefs about ourselves on to another person. This is the type that narcissists use, although it's not exclusive to narcissism and anyone can do it inadvertently. For example, we might think someone is doing something because they are trying to compete with us, instead of recognising that, in fact, we are competing with them. And we do it because it's painful to look at our own 'stuff' that we are projecting, so it's easier to displace it on to someone else.

In therapy, we try to shed light on projection by asking our clients, 'Who do they remind you of?' Often, the answer is a parent or sibling or someone else significant from their childhood and they are projecting a behavioural pattern of that person from their past on to a new acquaintance.

That's not to say that disliking someone is always a projection. We are allowed to dislike people, but it's worth asking, 'Do I dislike them because of them or me?' to establish whether the feeling is based purely on their behaviour, values and so on, and not on something we are rejecting in ourselves.

Projecting intentions or emotions

We saw Rebecca project on to her friend her mother's intent, behaviour and feelings, using assumption, rather than asking her friend for clarification. This denied her friend her autonomy, because Rebecca's assumption about what she was thinking gave

her no chance to express her own thoughts, which was unfair and unboundaried.

Jack might have accused his wife of being insecure, clingy and anxious when, in fact, he felt those things. He just didn't want to acknowledge them in himself.

Megan and Rebecca might have assumed people were standoffish and stuck up, when they were keeping someone at arm's length. Jack would think nothing of making decisions for the family without consulting his wife, because he projected on to her his thoughts and feelings, assuming she wanted exactly what he did. If we have unhealthy relational patterns, we project on to everyone the same behaviour and motivation or intent. We assume everyone will behave like and have the same beliefs as our abuser.

Again, this is a survival tactic. It's helpful and safer to be able to predict how someone behaves, especially if it's potentially threatening. The danger is it clouds our vision and, by extension, our relationships. It doesn't allow for the individual experience of the other; it doesn't allow their autonomy.

Complementary projection

Complementary projection is used to forge and force bonds with someone by projecting on to them feelings and beliefs aligned with our own.

The narcissist projects on to their children (or friends, colleagues, etc.) a set of beliefs and ideals that complements their own. And if anyone does something to contradict those projected beliefs, feelings and ideals, the narcissist will view that show of individuality as a personal rejection, as a result of which they will be enraged, shaming, punishing and humiliating their victim.

Complementary projection will likely happen in most relationships, and when the projection is revealed, for example, in

conversation, the relationship will usually survive it (unless it's something that is too misaligned with one or other person's values and beliefs). However, in relationship with a narcissist, complementary projection is at the root of love bombing and it is the challenge to this projection that triggers the breadcrumbing phase (see p. 161).

Obligation and guilt

Obligation and guilt go hand in hand. We feel obliged to do something and, if we refuse, we feel guilty. The narcissistic parent exploits these feelings to ensure their child and those around them will feel obliged to prioritise their needs, so as to avoid feeling guilty.

What's the difference between guilt and shame? They are closely related and often feed each other. We find it helpful to distinguish them as follows:

- 'I did a bad thing' = guilt
- 'I am a bad person' = shame

> Jack's mother mumbled down the phone, 'I haven't left my home for thirty years on Christmas Day. You can't possibly care about me if you don't come to us on Christmas Day.'
>
> It may be clear to some hearing this that Jack's mother was being manipulative to get her own way, but in a relationship like this, such behaviour becomes normalised, so Jack didn't recognise what was happening. He just felt obligated to do what was expected of him and guilty if he

didn't. Jack had sacrificed himself and his Christmas plans for many years, feeling he had to go to his mother. Saying 'no' didn't seem to be an option. When he suggested that his mother and father could come to him instead, they refused, laughing at the idea that they should go to his place, implying that Jack was ridiculous to even consider it.

Jack would have loved to spend a Christmas Day with his wife and children in their own home, but his mother exploited his guilt response to make him feel obliged to prioritise her needs.

If we say, 'I don't want to go to the party, but I don't have a choice,' what we are really saying is, 'I don't want to go to the party, but I feel obliged because the person I'm disappointing will feel a certain way and I'll be responsible for that.' When we say, 'I don't have a choice,' what we are really saying is, 'I don't want to face the conflict of prioritising my own needs.'

The child of a narcissistic parent is regularly punished for showing any critical thinking or individuation or autonomy. They are punished every time they try to express themselves authentically, disagree or say no. Their fear of conflict and punishment will compel them to try to over-explain and justify why they feel their need is more important.

Jane's boss often asked her to work overtime. She regularly agreed, even though she really didn't want to. Jane had a compulsive sense of obligation and duty, and the thought of saying no filled her with feelings of dread and hopelessness. She feared the conflict that might follow

as a result. She felt that she didn't have a choice, so she'd say yes and commit to something she was uncomfortable with, kicking herself afterwards for being such a doormat. When Jane received a date for a medical appointment, instead of asking for the day off directly, she justified why she could not come into work, and over-explained it: because of the location of the hospital, the time of the procedure, the discomfort she would be in afterwards. Jane did not think that her needs were a priority, and she feared the reaction from her boss, so she chose to avoid the conflict at all costs by over-explaining. What Jane didn't realise was that by over-explaining, she was devaluing her own needs and giving someone else an opportunity to devalue and dismiss them also.

Rebecca regularly dismissed and ignored her own needs. She felt guilty at even the thought of slightly inconveniencing other people. Rebecca never wanted to be a burden and would have hated to offend or put others out, to the extent that even if she had to use the loo, she would ignore that need, so that the other person would not have to wait on her.

Most of us feel guilty when we do something wrong or hurt others. Guilt is a natural emotional response. It is like our own moral compass, keeping us in line with the person we want to be. But with the toxic parent, *they* tell us who we *should* be.

When we make a mistake (which we will because we're human), guilt can motivate us to apologise or make up for what we did.

But, in excess, guilt places a heavy burden and weight of expectation and responsibility on those who experience it, and they can misguidedly let their fear of the guilt become the driving force behind every decision.

Motivational empathy

A narcissistic parent will exploit a child's guilt by weaponising their empathy for their own gain. This is called motivational empathy, which we explored in Chapter 2, but essentially it's triggering an empathy response to manipulate the child into doing something the narcissistic parent wants them to do. It hooks into the child's shame, too, to make them feel guilty for not prioritising the parent's needs.

If the toxic parent is not getting their own way, they will use blame and accusations to create feelings of guilt in the child. They will pout, shame, act out, throw a tantrum, play the victim, blame and shame the child into believing that it was their action that caused their parent's feelings. The narcissistic parent expects the child to take on the global, all-encompassing responsibility for their parent's issues, using blame to suggest that it was the child's fault, thus eliciting their guilt, so as to manipulate them into doing what they want.

> Jane said, 'Whenever I wouldn't go somewhere my mom wanted, she'd say, "Don't worry about me, I'll go by myself, then!" I'd feel so guilty that I'd give in.' As a result, any time Jane attempted to do anything for herself or say no to her boss/friend/co-worker/family member, she was eaten up with guilt. She didn't realise that the

past was blurring with the present and it was like she was being catapulted back to being six years old again. She felt responsible for fixing everyone else's emotions – like she was the saviour to those around her. Jane believed that her empathy was driving her behaviour, but actually it was her fear, obligation and guilt (FOG).

Megan remembered martyrdom and self-sacrifice being praised in her family, bordering on congratulating people for their selflessness. Any type of healthy self-interest was mocked or shamed as someone having 'notions about themselves', 'ideas above their station' or being 'too big for their boots'. Megan even felt guilty for sitting down to rest before she'd finished all she had to do. The task of completing everything put her under such pressure that she was regularly burned out.

Megan was also unable to ask for help: 'I do everything by myself. If someone helps me, I feel like I owe them something. I hate feeling like that; it just seems easier to do it by myself.' Megan's mother taught her that if she did something nice for her, Megan then felt obliged to do whatever what was asked of her. She disliked feeling indebted to someone else – hated feeling so powerless and out of control. As a result of never asking for help, she became entrenched in the role as the 'strong' one, which kept people at a distance because they never saw her as a human who struggled like everyone else.

Believing the best in people – 'I just want the best for you'

Whenever Jane told her mother that the constant criticisms hurt her feelings, her mother would respond with 'I'm just trying to help, I want the best for you. It's for your own good!' Jack, Megan and Rebecca all heard similar things whenever they complained about their parents' treatment of them. So they started believing that even if someone was unkind to them, they were still a good person. Even when faced with someone who was only ever unkind to them, they would try their hardest to find a reason why that person wasn't bad – because their parent taught them that even if they were being unkind, critical, judgemental, invasive and a downright bully, they were still good, and 'meant well'.

This is a learned behaviour and a coping mechanism. Jane used it to avoid having to hold anyone to account and to escape acknowledging the pain caused by her mother – because the child protects the attachment relationship at all costs, and to admit that her mother may have been unkind just for the sake of it meant risking losing the relationship.

Cognitive dissonance

Cognitive dissonance protects us from accepting painful truths. Every one of us uses it to some degree, but when it's too heavily relied on, it puts us at risk, because we are so desperate to hold on to our beliefs that we ignore or justify the facts.

We see this all the time in society, where facts contradict beliefs. It's why if someone's partner cheats on them, they will say, 'They were tempted by the other person; they would never do that willingly.' Which is, of course, denial. It's absolutely ignoring the fact that their partner had as much choice in the cheating as the other party. But that's too painful to bear, so blame is cast elsewhere

instead, so that the partner stays aligned with their perception – plus, it helps them to preserve their own self-worth if they can believe that the cheating was not about them.

The narcissistic parent eradicates their child's judgement system, so that even as adults, when someone is vile to them, they look for all sorts of reasons to explain away the behaviour – 'Oh, they're just having a bad day' or, 'It wasn't their fault; their friend made them do it' – and they continue to accept and tolerate it. That's why we stay in unhealthy relationships as adults, finding excuses for people's behaviour, allowing us to hold on to our belief that nobody would hurt us intentionally or mean us harm, and so avoiding the risk of losing them by facing reality.

Of course, unfortunately, some people do mean us harm, and we need to be able to judge when this is the case. But if we believe people can have bad intentions, we then have to accept the possibility that our parent could have had bad intentions, too, and that is a grief we are not willing to face until the time is right.

Assuming blame
(moral defence and complementary moral defence)

If someone told Rebecca that she'd made a mistake or hurt someone, she would apologise before even giving it a thought – because she believed, to her core, that they must have been right if they thought they were. There wasn't even a moment for critical thinking or reflection. She automatically assumed that she was in the wrong just because the other person said so. 'It's my fault they treat me that way; I really am quite annoying and loud. I can't blame them for not liking it.'

The moral defence

Children are driven to protect their attachment relationship to their parent above all else. They will sacrifice everything they can to maintain it – even themselves. If there is a problem in the relationship, the child would rather believe that they are the one making mistakes and they are the one who isn't good enough. They do this because if they are the problem, then they can fix it, and there is hope that they will be able to have a good relationship with their parent. So if someone mistreats or abuses them in adulthood, they believe that it is their fault, that they are the problem, not the abuser.

As a coping mechanism, the moral defence protects relationships with attachment figures (parent or caregiver) by blaming self. The child carries the moral defence into all relationships and assumes that if there is a problem, they are at fault.

> When starting therapy Jane said: 'I want to fix me, so I can be a better daughter to my mother, and we can have a better relationship. I'm so oversensitive and react so badly when I know she just wants to help.' Jane never considered her mother was the problem, not her.

It's also why, even as adults, people will defend their narcissistic parent, saying things like 'They mean well' or, 'I don't want you to think badly of them' – because there is such a loss and grief when a child, whatever their age, recognises their parent is making mistakes, especially ones that have dramatically hurt their own development.

The complementary moral defence

The moral defence is exploited by the narcissistic parent, who weaponises their child's self-blame using the complementary moral defence.

In a healthy parent–child relationship, when the child says, 'Sorry for making you cross/sad/disappointed,' the parent might respond with, 'You haven't, darling. I shouldn't have got angry with you,' or, 'It's OK. You're human – you're allowed to make mistakes.' They will reassure the child that they aren't the problem, and that they as a parent are fallible and responsible for their own feelings and behaviour. They will teach that it was what the child said or did that was unacceptable, rather than the child themselves, and that it is OK to make mistakes.

The narcissistic parent does the complete opposite. They exploit the child's feeling that they're the problem and lock themselves into a place of perfection, where they are never at fault, blaming the child for any conflict or issues that arise in their relationship – because they *are* the problem. This is the complementary moral defence. The child then inhabits that belief and applies it to every relationship they ever have.

It's one of the reasons why children of narcissistic parents are so vulnerable to gaslighting. They already believe that they get things wrong, so they agree when others say this, too. It makes them extremely susceptible to further emotional abuse, and they are quick to apologise. They believe that holding someone accountable for their behaviour is rude and unkind, and they want to avoid being responsible for 'making' someone feel bad about themselves.

When Rebecca's boss gave her unclear instructions, instead of holding him accountable and asking for clarity, she apologised for misunderstanding, and even gave him space to blame her by saying, 'I know I'm being a bit stupid, but I don't understand what you asked me to do' (instead of, 'Please could you clarify what you're asking me to do'). She felt she couldn't ask him directly because she thought that would make her look rude or mean.

Because the narcissistic parent will always blame their child for any conflict or disagreement in the relationship, the child learns that they are always wrong (the complementary moral defence) and grows up with a deep-rooted conviction that they are always to blame; if a relationship breaks down or someone is feeling bad, they are responsible. They are the placeholder for all the bad/negative things in a relationship. They absorb all the conflict, slights and digs, like a sponge, holding on to them, each one further confirmation of the inner narrative that they are wrong, and everyone else is better than and knows more than them.

It's very hard to challenge this thinking, as it's so deeply embedded. One way, however, is to say, 'What would I think if it were my friend in this situation? Would I blame them?' By externalising the experience, we can see where blame or responsibility can be placed and understand where there might be something to apologise for.

Fear of conflict

Ideally, we learn how to approach, navigate and settle conflict in childhood. We learn that its purpose is to resolve and, as such, it is a healthy part of every relationship. However, in the narcissistic family system, conflict meets a brick wall – it isn't a place of negotiation, but one of abandonment and rejection. So as those children grow, they learn to do everything they can to avoid it, thereby protecting themselves and their attachment relationship.

The narcissistic parent sees conflict as a personal attack and responds with contempt and disgust to the child who takes issue. They don't recognise their child's dislikes as a normal

part of growth and building autonomy. They see them instead as something to be punished and shamed. Every reach for autonomy that misaligns with the parent's ideals and values is perceived by them as an intentional shaming of them. Essentially, they're saying, 'If your opinion is different to mine, it's wrong and should be punished and will be a source of conflict.'

In such cases, instead of being reparative, conflict becomes destructive, and the child learns to avoid it. They learn to be silent, because to be silent is to be safe. Nobody is angry, no one is shouting, no one is ignoring. And that silence carries through as they grow up, until, as an adult, they are unable to speak up for themselves and feel as though they have no power or ability to take charge of their own needs. They learn that asking for them to be met is more dangerous than ignoring them. They learn that conflict is terminal to a relationship and, as they move into different relationships, they view it as an apocalyptic threat. So they avoid conflict, by not sharing opinions that differ from their friends', colleagues' or partners'. They stay silent for fear of being abandoned, rejected or shamed. Because in childhood, this was the safest course of action.

Rebecca recalled a childhood full of anger. 'We would all be sitting at the table laughing and joking, then all of a sudden, she would start shouting at me. It came out of nowhere. Suddenly, I was in the firing line, and it was so confusing. Everyone sat there in silent shock, watching her shout, and I would be begging her to tell me what I had done. Eventually, she might tell me, though sometimes she wouldn't. Usually, it was something I didn't

even realise I had done, like looking at her in a certain way or laughing at a joke about her a bit too loudly. She really hated it if she thought I was laughing at her. I'm terrified now whenever I hear raised voices. I freeze and then panic about what I did to cause it and how I will fix it, even when it's people I don't know.'

Rebecca had what we call a 'trigger'. Whenever anyone got angry, she felt in adulthood the same as she did as a child when her mother was annoyed and with the same desperation to find a way to stop the anger. That's why she avoided letting people know they'd hurt or let her down. She was so scared of the anger that she preferred to stay silent.

Jane often felt invisible in her marriage and that her opinion had no value. She felt that she was only there for what she provided for her husband as the dutiful wife, caring for him, their children and even his mother. Jane gaslighted herself by pretending these things weren't happening. Instead of holding her husband responsible, she remained in an endless cycle of self-blame. To avoid conflict, Jane blamed herself and thought of ways she could be different. 'If I give him a bit more attention, maybe he'd be happier. If I hadn't raised my voice at him, maybe he wouldn't have acted like that towards me.' She did this to feel in control. By avoiding conflict, Jane was trying to control her husband's emotions and avoid rejection.

Jane was scared to confront her husband about any of this out of fear that it would result in confirmation of what she already knew. Because for Jane, conflict was about shame and humiliation, not resolution. When someone was annoyed with her, or she knew she'd done something wrong, Jane avoided conflict to escape the shame of not being 'good enough'. And, of course, because she was hypervigilant, she was very aware of anyone being upset. What she might have been confused about was whether or not they were upset with her.

When the child of a narcissist is faced with conflict

When conflict is brought to the child of a narcissist by someone they've upset or offended, it can trigger a huge fear and shame response. Four things typically happen when a person has heard all their lives that they're not good enough:

- They absolutely concretely believe it.
- They feel they have absolutely no control or power over their lives.
- They believe that for other people to love or accept them they have to be 100 per cent perfect *all* the time.
- When something crops up that suggests they're not perfect, it's a terrible, terrible threat, and instead of being able to accept responsibility and realise it's OK to make a mistake – one mistake doesn't make them the worst person in the entire world – they defend themselves. They explain all the reasons why they made the mistake, and perhaps even why it wasn't their fault. They look for others to blame and ways to justify it.

This is defence behaviour from someone with a not-good-enough wound. The one that really, really hurts because it is exactly where the narcissistic parent hooked into them to build the shame that facilitated control and dominance.

When the not-good-enough wound is touched, a person will do everything they can to protect it, because to recognise it or accept that they made a mistake is to confirm the terrible, shameful narrative that they are never good enough.

When we explain this to people, it can provoke some very difficult feelings of fear and shame, because it is very similar to the narcissist's behaviour. However, it's different because, when our clients start healing, they begin to see how they are separate from their mistakes and responsible for their behaviour, and accept themselves as the wonderful, fallible humans they are. A narcissist would never consider themselves fallible.

The adult child of the narcissist can also feel defensive when they have to admit they have done something wrong. In childhood, they had to protect themselves against punishment, because to concede that they had done whatever they were being accused of meant attack, abandonment and shame. So naturally, in adulthood, they will continue to defend against attack, until they know they are safe to make mistakes.

It's also very important we remember that sometimes we have what are called 'learned behaviours', where we repeat the way our parents behaved because we've been taught that's 'normal'.

When Rebecca was small, if she made a mistake, her mother would shout at her, call her stupid, wicked or a liar. So she learned that the best way to cover up was to

blame everything and everyone around her, finding all the different reasons why she wasn't at fault.

In adulthood, that meant that Rebecca wasn't taking responsibility for her actions, which was, of course, problematic. However, the difference between Rebecca not taking responsibility and her mother doing the same thing was that when gently shown what she was doing to protect herself, Rebecca felt remorse, possibly shame, and started trying to change the behaviour, whereas her mother never would.

It's really important to remember that a child develops all these coping mechanisms and trauma responses *to survive*. But in adulthood the same strategies can become unhelpful and detrimental. They are the armour that has to be surrendered in adulthood, piece by piece, in order to be able to experience healthy, authentic relationships.

CHAPTER 6

Parentification

> Megan: 'If I wanted to go somewhere without her, or if I liked someone else and wanted to be with them, it was like I was deliberately trying to wound her – like I was betraying her somehow. She was in every bit of my business; it was suffocating.'

Most societies laud and praise the parentified child, romanticise them, even. They are perceived as 'the good child', 'the helpful child', 'a mature child' or 'an old head on young shoulders'. Society celebrates the child who helps their parent carry the load of parenting and of running a home, instead of recognising the damage it causes to their development.

Parentification emotionally cripples a child, leaving them isolated and vulnerable to exploitation. It is a form of emotional abuse -- a toxic family dynamic – but because of how it is normalised and praised in most cultures, it's rarely talked about. It destroys a child's emotional, physical, spiritual and sexual boundaries, not to mention any chance they have of building a healthy sense of identity, value and worth. Instead, they focus on helping and making others happy and sacrificing themselves continuously as a result.

This happens when parents demand that their children take on responsibilities beyond their age and development, repeatedly

prioritising their own needs above the child's and punishing them for asking for *their* needs to be met if they don't align with their parent's. Punishment can be verbal, emotional or physical threat, leaving no room for the child to consider, identify or express their own needs.

When a parent relinquishes their parental responsibilities, whether consciously or unconsciously, they force the child to fend for themselves and take over the caretaking role and practical responsibilities for their siblings, and even their parents, reversing the parent–child roles. The child sacrifices their own basic needs because they have to accommodate and care for the practical and emotional needs of their family.

This is not to say that helping a parent is a bad thing. The problem arises when the parent exploits a desire to help, or when the child realises that the way they are seen and valued by their parent is by helping, and their helpfulness becomes a condition of their self-worth. They then come to believe that their value to others is based entirely on what they can do (or offer to do) for them.

A parentified child may display some or all of the following characteristics:

- Mature for their age
- Preferring being with adults than their peers
- The responsible one in a group
- The problem solver
- Taking charge of the younger children
- Playing Mum to their peers
- Being overly worried about bad things happening and danger
- Finding play with peers difficult

One major impact of parentification is that it disconnects the child from their peers. A parentified child does not have the freedom to

explore, have fun and play. They are drawn to people older and younger than them, often feeling uncomfortable with their peers. This can be extremely isolating when it comes to connecting with their peers, because the parentified child feels cast adrift, unless they are in charge or adding value to the play by being helpful.

For the parentified child, play seems pointless, so they don't know how to connect with it. They only know how to connect through servitude. The conditioning of parentification means they assume the role of Mum in their peer group and feel like they need to take on a caring position, which detaches them from the rest of the group. This dynamic makes it hard for them to relate to the others, whose behaviour will seem immature and childish to them, despite it being age appropriate.

Rebecca recalled being at a party when she was nine. The adults were downstairs in the living room, while the children were upstairs in a large playroom. Rebecca felt out of place, until someone broke a lightbulb, at which point she swung into action, picking up the hot pieces of broken glass with her bare hands. She remembers her sense of pride and relief, as though she had finally found a way to fit in. All the adults praised her bravery and told her how glad they were that she was there to keep everyone safe. But looking back, Rebecca saw a sad and lonely little girl who didn't understand how to play with her peers. She only knew how to look after them. In fact, she was often referred to by peers as bossy and boring, but she didn't know how else to be other than in charge and taking responsibility for everyone else's wellbeing.

In a healthy parent–child relationship there are healthy boundaries. The parent makes it clear, whether implicitly or explicitly, that they are responsible for providing safety and security for the child and that the child can rely on them for stability. In the unhealthy parentified child relationship, however, the parent exploits the child's desire for a safe and secure attachment with their parent. And since, as we have seen, children will prioritise their attachment relationship over everything else, they willingly sacrifice their own needs to keep their parents safe and happy.

Parentification conditions the child to act as caretaker, mediator and protector in the family, too – all the responsibilities that should belong to an adult. The child is taught that their 'job' is to protect and support their parents however they can. Children in this role often end up feeling as though their siblings or parents cannot survive without their help and this has the lifelong negative impacts we saw in Chapters 4 and 5. Not caring for their parents is not an option, because of the punishing consequences it could lead to, such as stonewalling (the parent withholding love), rage or violence between the parents, for which the child would blame themselves.

So the child focuses on supporting, protecting and nourishing their parent but at a huge cost to themselves. Being burdened with excessive responsibilities sets a toxic trap for a child, making them hyper-independent at a young age.

The parentified child never receives praise for who they are as a person because they are acknowledged only when they are helping their parents or meeting their parents' needs. The child feels fulfilled in their 'parenting' role because they think they are receiving love and attention from someone, but this is not love. This is exploitation.

Megan believed kindness was unsafe, not to be trusted, and the only person she could rely on was herself. She prided herself on being able to do everything without help and never being a burden or beholden to anyone.

The parentified child also becomes hyper-dependent when they gain their sense of worth and value by meeting the needs of others.

Jane could only relax if everyone was OK. Then she could be OK, too. If someone wasn't OK, she felt an overwhelming responsibility to fix and make things better for that person. When she wasn't helping others, she felt unseen in her relationships. Jane felt compelled to provide for others, even if they didn't want her to.

Parentification can be broken down into three types:

- Emotional
- Instrumental
- Narcissistic

It should be noted that emotional and instrumental parentification can exist outside of narcissistic parenting, but a narcissistic parent will use these *and* narcissistic parentification.

Emotional parentification

In emotional parentification the parent relies on their child for emotional support, which is never appropriate. It forces the child

to be responsible for their parent's emotional wellbeing because the parent prioritises their own emotional needs, and as a result the child's personal needs are neglected. They are forced to carry the emotional burden and provide guidance and reassurance to their parent – the complete opposite of what should be happening.

Emotionally parentified children are typically the mediators in the home, often used by Mum and Dad as their 'go between', breaking up fights between them or their siblings and taking on the roles of peacekeeper, mini therapist, confidant and emotional caretaker in their relationship with their parent. They spend their entire childhood trying to keep the peace and resolve conflict, the weight of which is far too much for anyone to carry, let alone a child. A child should never be offering emotional support to their parent, *even in adulthood.*

Rebecca's mother frequently had emotional breakdowns and sobbed to her daughter about how hard her life was. She discussed at length the divorce she was going through with Rebecca's father, including the specifics around custody. 'Imagine not even wanting to see your own children!' Rebecca felt hurt and uncomfortable about this and when she told her mother, the response was, 'How could you be so selfish? I've got no one to talk to. You need to face up to reality, anyway – your father is worse than useless.'

Rebecca's mother also threatened suicide when her children resisted doing something she had ordered them to do. She locked herself in a room and told them she was going to hurt herself, and it was their fault for arguing with her. Somewhat tellingly, when Rebecca picked up the phone to

call the emergency services, her mother came out and told her daughter to stop overreacting.

Rebecca's mother was loud and persistent in her demands from everyone around her and decimated anyone who disagreed. She placed her own needs on a pedestal and demanded that everyone worship them. Rebecca's never even featured. She blamed her daughter for every single negative emotion she felt. Rebecca became the placeholder for her mother's anger, rage, sadness and disappointment, which led to her feeling like the worst person ever.

A tell-tale sign of emotional parentification is when a parent refers to their child as their 'best friend', confiding in them about their struggles, whether financial, emotional, relationship-based or all these things. This is wholly inappropriate. A child is not their parent's best friend. A best friend is someone who has equal responsibility for the safety of the relationship. A child should not bear such a responsibility.

Suggesting that a child is in any way accountable for the well-being of their parent, or their relationship, negates the parent's responsibility as carer and guide for the child as they grow up.

Instead of working on the relationship difficulties between them, Megan's parents involved their daughter in a very toxic way. Megan's father would disappear and leave her to provide the emotional support her mother demanded of her. Her mother, in turn, treated Megan as a substitute spouse, unburdening all her worries and fears about her relationship and life in general. Instead of

protecting Megan, her parents abandoned her emotionally, and then saddled her with the responsibility of fixing their relationship.

A parent treating their child as an intimate partner is referred to as emotional incest; it's a form of emotional abuse that disrupts the child's development, leading to all the behaviours described in Chapters 4 and 5.

When Megan's mother complained about her dad, it made Megan feel responsible for fixing the situation. She felt angry with her father for upsetting her mum and let him know this, but the attempt to protect her mother drove a wedge between her and her father. 'I was like a fishwife with Dad, telling him to cut the grass, tidy outside, pay Mum more attention, clean up after himself, pick up his clothes, stop staying out late in the pub. I used to remind him of their anniversary and her birthday and buy his presents for Mum because he'd either forget or ask me to. It was easier to avoid a row and easier if Mum was happy.'

Megan's mother centred herself in her relationship with her daughter and demanded her daughter did the same. Megan therefore never developed a sense of who she was as an individual away from her mother and became completely disconnected from her own wellbeing. Instead, she became entirely dependent on her mother being OK.

When the parent portrays themselves as the victim, they force the child into the role of rescuer, minder and protector. The narcissistic parent then weaponises their child's feelings of guilt against

them, making the child feel sorry for them and responsible for their protection.

The obligation to fix, the fear of the reaction of not doing so and the guilt around not pleasing the parentifying parent become so insidious and ingrained in the child that they believe they have consented to this responsibility, feeling as though it's their choice to help parent the children, give Mum their money and provide emotional support and advice to their parent. However, that's impossible, because a child cannot give informed consent to their boundaries being violated in such a way. They have no understanding of the impact it will have on them, and that it is unhealthy and wrong.

The parentified child will also feel greatly valued through having this responsibility. Imagine the importance of being the child who fixes the family.

Jack's father lived at home but was rarely there, and, even when he was, he was emotionally unavailable to both his children and his wife. 'Dad was either working or socialising and whenever he was at home, he was so tired he'd just lie on the couch watching TV, barking orders at me. My mum was lonely and sad all the time. She wanted me to come sit on her knee and read her magazines with her. I remember feeling uncomfortable and saying no, but she looked so sad that I'd give in, and when I'd say yes, she'd give me the biggest smile and a can of Coke (which I was never allowed) and a packet of crisps. She used to look at me and tell me how handsome I was and that I would break hearts. She made me promise never to leave her alone like Daddy did.'

Jack struggled to see his mother's overreliance on him, and his wife thought that he 'never cut the apron strings' in that relationship. The truth is that in childhood his mother never let go and manipulated him into staying close to her. This is a wound that Jack was not ready to face, keeping him in denial.

Parentified children are treated as adults by narcissistic parents, and that role is often reinforced by people outside the family home, such as teachers who enjoy having a reliable, sensible student in class, or perhaps an observer offering approval of mature behaviour.

They are not seen as children who are emotionally developing and need emotional support. They are seen and treated as adults who can understand and navigate any crisis or issue. The parent teaches the child that they have infinite power over others' emotions and wellbeing and can identify, fix and rescue them from any sadness and problems.

The boundaries are skewed for the child, who is too young to understand that the problems they are trying to solve are not their own and it's not their responsibility to manage the emotional crises of adults. This sets them up for an adulthood of feeling responsible for others' problems, emotions and behaviours and spending endless time trying to 'fix' those closest to them.

Jane's mother was very critical of her, which is why Jane was so grateful for her relationship with her dad. She described herself as a daddy's girl, something she felt made her mother resentful and jealous. 'I felt safe with Dad; it was us against the world, like he was on my team.

He always said I was his favourite, and he wanted the best for me. He would tell me to ignore my mother and say she didn't mean it. He told me to just do whatever she wanted to keep the peace and not upset her. He said, "She's mean to me, too." And she was – always criticising him. I used to feel so sorry for him. How could she be so mean to him? He would moan so much about her to me, yet whenever I'd try to stand up for myself, Mum would run down the hall crying and he'd tell me off for upsetting my mother and make me apologise.'

Jane's dad was prioritising his own emotional needs, protecting himself from the wrath of his wife, but in doing so he failed to protect his daughter, abdicating and neglecting his responsibilities as a parent. He allowed his wife to be verbally and emotionally abusive to Jane, and not only did he not shield her from this, he enabled it by denying, minimising and dismissing it saying, 'That's just your mother. You know what she's like. Don't provoke her. She didn't mean it.'

This led Jane to doubt her own reality and cemented the false belief that this was love and she was overreacting and being too sensitive. Jane learned that she had to keep her mum happy in order to keep her dad happy. She felt obligated to meet her parents' needs, and if she rocked the boat or didn't fall in line, she'd be on the receiving end of her father's disappointment or anger.

The emotionally parentified child can develop a deep sense of loyalty towards the parent, often becoming totally enmeshed in their emotions. They then don't have any idea of who they are as separate from their parent. Children adapt quickly to this role, and it

will likely be a lonely and confusing one because, while they care for and manage everyone's emotions, no one checks in to see how they feel, what they think or even if they're OK.

An emotionally parentifying parent is looking for dominance and control over their child. They will do anything in their power to keep the child reliant upon them and retain that control, which often means driving a wedge between their other relationships, sabotaging them. This is known as triangulation, which we will look at in more detail in Chapter 11.

Instrumental parentification (Cinderella syndrome)

Instrumental parentification occurs when a parent relies on their child to help run the house in a way that is not in keeping with the child's age, such as making them responsible for cooking, cleaning, running the home, as well as caring for their younger siblings. The instrumentally parentified child can also be appointed as the young carer to extended family members – say, taking care of a sick relative and organising medical appointments.

This is described as Cinderella syndrome because, just like Cinderella, the child is responsible for ensuring that everyone else's needs are met, while their own usually go ignored.

> Jack described having to caddy for his father every Saturday, while his friends were out playing football or going to the cinema. 'I didn't mind doing it occasionally, but he wanted me there every weekend, bossing me about and making fun of me in front of all his friends if I made a mistake. And then, when they had finished playing,

they would all sit in the bar, drinking and laughing, while I sat in the car because I was too young to be in the bar. I hated it – all of it. But if I complained, I was called lazy, selfish and stupid; even when I told him I got cold and scared in the car, he told me to man up and stop being such a wimp.'

An adult who was instrumentally parentified finds it impossible to relax. Even if everything is done, they will find something else to do, or, conversely, will feel so overwhelmed that they'll do nothing at all. The irony being the all-or-nothing experience. And when they aren't doing anything, they will be crushed by guilt, shame and fear that they are a terrible human being for doing nothing.

They also find it impossible to let someone care for them. It makes them feel uneasy, guilty and worried they will be seen as being manipulative, selfish or lazy. They are the ones who take care of others.

The instrumentally parentified adult believes their relationships are entirely dependent on them being helpful, useful and supportive to the point of self-sacrifice. Their entire worth and value are rooted in helping others. The ability to relax has to be relearned and is hard won.

Instrumental parentification is so normalised that most who have experienced it don't even realise it, let alone how it has impacted them. But just because something is 'normal', that doesn't mean it is healthy.

There is a big difference between teaching a child age-appropriate life skills and instrumentally parentifying them. When a child is instrumentally parentified, they are made responsible for chores around the house and should they express a desire not to

do these things – or not do them properly – the parent will use shame, humiliation, punishment and emotional abandonment to make them feel obliged to do them.

Rebecca described being on the receiving end of her mother's wrath when she didn't do her chore 'properly'. 'I remember, after I'd put my clothes away my mother stormed up the stairs and yanked the wardrobe door open. She said if I wasn't going to do the job properly, then I shouldn't bother doing it at all. She pulled all my clothes off the hangers and threw them out of the drawers on to the floor and made me do it again. I tried not to cry because that always made her say, "Stop crying or I'll give you something to cry about." Still to this day, I don't know what I did wrong. I was about six years old when it started.'

A clear sign of instrumental parentification is the child playing a mothering role to their younger siblings. The normalisation of this in many cultures comes at a tremendous cost to the child, who loses out not only on their childhood, but also their relationship with their siblings.

Jane always felt protective of her siblings, particularly the youngest. 'My parents joked about it and called me his other mother. His cot was in my room, so I did everything for him, from feeding during the night to settling him to sleep, and when he was older I did his homework with him. If he had any problems, he would

come to me. I didn't mind caring for him, but I did used to resent having to take my sister everywhere with me. Even when my friends came over I had to include her, and when I complained, my mother said I was being selfish.'

The siblings can end up resenting the parentified child, who is left feeling confused, unable to understand why this is happening when they are just doing what's expected of them.

Megan's brothers and sisters always called her bossy and fussy, telling her to 'just relax'. 'Whenever my mum went out, we had to clean the house spotless, and I would be in charge. I would tell my siblings what to do and they just didn't care, and called me a nag, or bossy or a stress head. They didn't understand that if Mum got home and the house wasn't immaculate, she would be furious. Not that you would know. She wouldn't shout, she would just ignore me, and huff and puff complaining that she would have to do it herself. Not that she ever did – it was just left to me to do next time.'

The instrumentally parentified child is denied a healthy childhood of freedom, play and carefree living. They lose out on building their identity through their relationships with peers, and on learning who they are as an individual. Their entire identity becomes rooted in service to their family, who exploit that and demand that they prioritise household chores and childcare over their own needs and wants.

Megan: 'Mum was always worried about money. She'd get really stressed when the bills came in, and she would come crying to me. I felt so worried that I came up with a plan to do odd jobs for relatives to get money and help her out. We were never allowed to put the heating on, even if it was freezing because she was worried about the bills. I mean, I get that, but she never stopped talking about it – but she always had money for cigarettes. To this day, I still have a problem turning the heating on for myself. I got a job at twelve and never asked them for anything. I put myself through school and handed most of my money to my parents. It's what we all did. Even when I moved out, it was still expected that I help them financially.'

In adulthood instrumentally parentified children show excessive caring and parental attitudes in peer relationships because the caring role has become an intrinsic part of their identity, and they often end up working in caretaking roles, such as nursing, counselling, childcare and teaching. They struggle to delegate and ask for help and end up doing too much because of their ingrained sense of duty and fear of the repercussions should they say no. They were taught that to be accepted in relationships, they had to be a caretaker, so they stay silent, and someone close or a partner may then exploit their helpfulness, playing the same role as the parent did, shaming, humiliating, punishing and abandoning them.

Narcissistic parentification

Narcissistic parentification involves emotional and instrumental parentification and more. It is essentially an extreme exercise in projection.

Projection, the casting of intentions or emotions on to another person (we discussed this in Chapter 5), is what characterises narcissistic parentification. The parent projects their thoughts, feelings, intentions and ideals on to the child.

> Rebecca's mother always accused her of doing bad things on purpose. 'If I knocked over a glass of milk, my mother screamed at me, asking why I was trying to make her life harder by giving her more work.'

Because the narcissistic parent sees the child as an extension of themselves, and not as a person with their own thoughts, dreams, wants and needs, they project an entire identity on to them and force them to live within its constraints. If the child steps outside of that fictional character, they are shamed, punished, humiliated and emotionally abandoned. Anything that misaligns with the parent's projection is completely rejected.

> When Jack said he wanted to be an actor when he grew up, his father laughed at him. 'No son of mine will be an actor; acting is for sissies. You want to be a lawyer or a doctor.' These were things Jack's father would have liked to be, but he didn't get the grades. When Jack was

a teenager, he and his father had huge arguments about what he should study at university. 'He talked down everything I said I wanted to do. That's how I ended up doing media law. I've never really liked it, but Dad loves telling everyone it's what I do.'

The child is not seen and respected as an individual, autonomous with their own thoughts or feelings. Narcissistic parentification leaves no room for the child to have their own emotions or indeed their own personality.

The projections also include emotions. Whatever the narcissist is feeling about themselves, they will project on to their children and everyone else around them. This means the child's own emotions are ignored, as they are told what they are feeling, thinking, intending, instead of being asked. Doing this to another adult is bad enough, but with a child it's horrific, because they have no agency and cannot leave the relationship. They also have no way of knowing that they are not the problem in the relationship.

When the child of a narcissist attempts to step out of the box they've been put in, the parent takes it as a personal rejection of themselves, and shames and guilts them in response.

Megan knew she couldn't tell her mother that she didn't like the clothes she chose for her. 'She would get upset, like she always did, if I didn't really like what she had chosen for me. It made me feel like the worst person in the world, so I ended up walking around in clothes I hated just to avoid upsetting her.'

Narcissistic parents use their children as placeholders for different emotions and different intentions. It is through narcissistic parentification that the family roles are created, as we will see in Chapter 7. Think of a dining-room table, for example, with the narcissistic parent having placed themselves at the head, and designated places for each child. Any child who attempts to move out of their place in an attempt at autonomy will be shot down and punished and pushed back into it by the narcissistic parent.

> Rebecca: 'I remember telling her I didn't want to be married when I was about fifteen. She scoffed at me and told me of course I would get married – everyone says that when they're a teenager, and they change their mind when they grow up. But I never did, and she would constantly say, "When you get married . . ." and I would remind her I wasn't going to. She would roll her eyes and talk about how she wanted to see her daughter walk down the aisle. She had planned my whole wedding. She completely denied that I might have a different expectation for my life than she did. And here I am, still not married, and still not wanting to be, and she's still waiting for me to change my mind.'

Through narcissistic parentification, a child is forced into a box that bears no relation to who they really are, but they will try to live up to the identity their parent wants for them so as to protect their relationship, the result being a loss of self, loss of identity and loss of childhood.

The parentified child struggles with setting healthy boundaries and is highly vulnerable to unhealthy, addictive, destructive and

narcissistic relationships in adulthood. Living in fear of rejection and abandonment, their anxiety pushes them to always be there for others.

Parentification also generates a harsh inner critic that keeps people trapped in an anxiety loop of fear, obligation and guilt (FOG – see pp. 72–87). Then, unsure of their own worth and desperate for love and affection, they become perfect prey for an abuser.

> Jane sought relationships with people who rejected or ignored her needs because it felt familiar to her. Instead of seeing an unhealthy or abusive relationship as one to walk away from, she saw a responsibility to repair her abusive partner. The pattern of emotional neglect is so ingrained that in adulthood, rather than raise alarms, the familiarity sustains it. Jane unintentionally repeated her childhood pattern and married a man who constantly belittled her and gaslit her. (For more on gaslighting, see Chapter 8.)

As parentification is so normalised and accepted by society, a risk for the parentified child is repeating the pattern they've been shown and ending up parentifying their own children unconsciously. This is very common and can be rectified in younger children by managing parental expectations, remembering it's a parent's job to teach their child life skills through chores around the home, but not make them fully responsible for them. And, of course, by creating healthy boundaries with children around responsibility for others and themselves. In Chapter 13, on boundaries, we will look at how someone can begin to care from a place of choice and love, not obligation and fear of abandonment. With older or adult

children, sitting down and apologising, and giving space to them to voice their anger, sadness or whatever emotion, while accepting responsibility without justification, will go a long way to healing wounds and repairing relationships.

Parentification affects all relationships. By understanding what has happened and how the abuse has affected them, the parentified child can begin to validate their own experience, and possibly for the first time ever have compassion for their younger self.

CHAPTER 7

The Roles in a Narcissistic Family System

> Jack: 'My brother was the golden boy. He couldn't do anything wrong, whereas I couldn't do anything right. My dad either shouted at me or ignored me. That's until I got a job that impressed him – suddenly, he couldn't be more interested and made out like we were best friends. It's so confusing.'

Imagine the narcissistic parent is a lighthouse. The light beam is their love and affection and the children are boats trying to avoid crashing into rocks. To escape drowning, to feel safe, they need the light from the lighthouse. So they do whatever is needed to keep the light on them, even if that means sacrificing the other boats. The lighthouse knows it has this power. It knows it can choose who will be safe and who will drown, and so weaponises its light beam, using it to tempt the boats closer, following whatever path the beam illuminates for them, regardless of whether or not it's where they want to go. And just as a boat starts to relax and can see the harbour, where they will be safe, the lighthouse swings its beam away – either to another boat, or just along a different path, away from the safety of the harbour.

Meanwhile, the other boats look on with envy at the boat in the light, on the safe path, avoiding the rocks. They often don't see that the boat in the light isn't getting to choose where it goes, that it's just doing everything possible to stay safely in the light.

That's the power of the narcissistic parent. They choose who is safe and who isn't, and they dangle love like a carrot in front of their children, asking them to fight for it, to compete for it, to try to win it, whatever the cost.

In the narcissistic family system, nobody gets to be safe. Nobody gets to be loved. Everybody has to sacrifice themselves for a brief blissful moment in the light.

The children's roles

There are three roles for children in the narcissistic family system:

- The invisible child
- The golden child
- The scapegoat child

Where there is only one child, they will likely move through the roles, sometimes slowly but at other times so fast it gives them whiplash. It's disorientating, confusing and incredibly lonely. Without siblings, the only child is always in the hot seat, the spotlight on them; there's nowhere to hide for a brief reprieve nor anyone to share their experience.

With two children, they will again cycle through all three roles, perhaps at different paces. It might be that one role isn't utilised as much as the others (invisible) and the roles might stay rigid for longer periods than would be the case with more children.

The invisible child

Rebecca: 'My sister was like this ethereal being. She was off in fairy land all the time. She barely spoke a word and would just sit wide-eyed, watching as my mother shouted at me. She wouldn't say boo to a goose she's so timid.'

The invisible child is the rarest of the roles in the narcissistic family system. They seldom attend therapy because the intensity of the relationship is too much for them to bear and, as such, we don't see them very often, which is sadly ironic.

The invisible child recognises the toxicity, the abuse and the behaviour, but they also recognise that speaking up against it puts them in emotional or physical danger, so they learn to hide in plain sight. They become part of the background, merging into the scenery, so as to avoid being a target.

The invisible child is horribly neglected and ignored. Always forgotten and an afterthought. In childhood, they are the day-dreamer, the one who spends hours playing alone, making up worlds to escape into. They are likely creative, loving books, stories, drawing or any subject they can immerse themselves in and feel connected to.

In the narcissistic family system, this child is overlooked again and again. They will quite literally be invisible to the rest of the family. They feel as though they have no impact, and don't matter. They feel guilty and scared to take up space. This means that they grow up very isolated and find it hard to trust people, making them extremely independent, viewing others as unreliable and undependable.

They have very few personal relationships – one, maybe two very close friends, usually from childhood. They may or may not have a partner, but will find intimacy extremely threatening, which is why they have so few people around them. Occasionally, they may have a series of shallow relationships that never go anywhere.

The invisible child in adulthood is often so disconnected from their feelings that they would describe themselves as numb. They disconnect to survive as children because to feel their feelings would have meant they might express them, compromising their invisibility – their protection – and, ultimately, their survival.

The invisible child is an extreme hyper-independent but is also extremely dependent on those relationships they do have and may do anything at all to preserve the connections with people they've allowed past their defences. Unfortunately, this can make them very vulnerable to people who exploit the wound that sits around abandonment and rejection, meaning they may well experience abusive relationships or ones built on their compliance.

However, there is hope! The hope for the invisible child is that therapy can be so very effective. If they can tolerate the discomfort of building a relationship with a therapist, the healing will grow just in the existence of the relationship.

Who is the invisible child?

Where there is an invisible child, it's typically in families that have three or more children, and they will either be the youngest or second-youngest child. They will usually have an older sibling of the same sex and, as such, have no place to fill based on gender/sex.

The golden child

The golden child is the placeholder for all the good things the narcissistic parent believes (rightly or wrongly) about themselves. They project on to the golden child good intentions, motives, thoughts, feelings and anything they can that is positive.

The golden child is placed on a lofty pedestal, far removed from their siblings and idolised. They avoid responsibility for their behaviour or actions, and, where avoidance is impossible due to evidence, they will be justified.

The golden child is the model child. They sit in the warmth of their parent's affection and adoration, but as a result, the siblings feel resentment towards them, leaving them in an impossible situation, having to choose between isolation from their siblings but adoration from their parent, or closeness with their siblings and vilification from their parent. The safer choice, especially for young children, is obvious.

There's a misconception around the golden child – that they have the easy life, the free ride, and that for them life feels golden. And sure, it does look like that from the outside. The golden child is excused for every misdemeanour, their needs are prioritised over their siblings' or other people's, but – whether consciously or subconsciously – the golden child has to work to keep their position. To stay in the light.

They need to constantly meet the expectations of their parent, and be who their parent has decided they are. This is especially true when there is more than one child. The golden child clings to their pedestal, knowing they could be knocked off at any moment. But to stay on it, they have to sacrifice their identity – because to step towards autonomy means losing their spot.

Golden children are often forced to 'collude' with their parent in the abuse towards their siblings. It's important to notice that this is a survival technique. They recognise, whether consciously or not (more likely not), that arguing against the abuse would mean being knocked off their pedestal and suffering the same treatment as the others. And, of course, they want to avoid that. Sometimes, during their teenage years, the golden child will see more clearly what is going on and will stand up to the parent, quickly earning themselves the role of scapegoat.

How the golden child presents in adulthood is dependent on how rigid the roles were in childhood. A devastating impact of being a golden child (more likely to occur in the rigid family-role system) is the golden child developing Narcissistic Personality Disorder (NPD) themselves, due to their complete lack of identity growing up. They're not taught to take responsibility, and being loved depends on their perfectionism. They're not given boundaries either, or taught how to have healthy relationships. So they will believe that everyone should idolise them, as their parent did (and does), and then feel shocked and horrified when that doesn't happen. As a result, they will be unable to form meaningful connections and relationships with others and may also suffer with mental-health issues.

Again, where the role was totally rigid, the golden child will often have a life independent of their parent, moving away, and finding a career or work or partner with status and social standing. They then becomes the prodigal child, lauded and celebrated whenever they throw a breadcrumb of attention to their narcissistic parent. They will have no problem swanning into the family environment and commenting on how things are being managed by their siblings, taking over the space, dominating and reverting to the original dynamic from childhood.

Megan: 'My older brother lives on the other side of the country. He visits once a year and it's a nightmare every time. He waltzes in like he owns the place, starts telling me what to do around the house, takes over the TV and forces everyone to watch football, even though no one else likes it. It's just like when we were kids: him bossing everyone and taking over everything, getting his way, and my mother never seems to see it or stop it. It's so annoying.'

Where the roles are more fluid, albeit with slow movement, the golden child may find it easier to move away and find their own path, but they will find it harder to deny the pull of the narcissistic parent and, in this instance, they will feel obliged and responsible for their parent – that they have to provide for them and do what's demanded of them, such as attending events like Christmas, birthdays and Mother's or Father's Day. This often causes huge friction in relationships, although it might be enabled if the partner is also scared of the wrath of the parent-in-law.

Jack: 'Every year it's the same. I get in a fight with my wife about going to my mother's for Mother's Day. I don't understand what the problem is. We have to go; it's just the way it is and always has been. It's not like my wife is my mother – and I always make the kids get her a present, so it's not like she's ignored. I don't see what the fuss is about.'

Golden children often don't see the abuse – because to do so means sacrificing their spot in the sun. Accepting their parent as abusive/toxic means letting go of their own self-image and recognising that perhaps they're not the person their parent has built them up to be, so losing a source of intense (if unrealistic) validation: their narcissistic parent. This leads to a crushing loss of identity, self-worth, self-belief and self-esteem. Also, to acknowledge the abusive behaviour means conceding that they probably enabled the narcissistic parent, and that alone is a place filled with guilt and grief that many are unable to access and process. Having said that, it does happen. And when it does, it can be incredibly validating for the others who were victimised by that narcissistic parent.

The golden child is also the one who has most hope of holding boundaries and calling out the narcissistic parent on behaviour without risking the same level of backlash as the scapegoat. Or are they?

Who is the golden child?

Jane: 'My brother is the oldest, Mum's golden boy. He can do no wrong in her eyes, and even if he does, it's usually my fault he did it, even now as adults.'

Rebecca: 'My brother is the oldest boy; my mother thinks he farts rainbows, she adores him so much.'

Megan: 'My brother is the third child, but the oldest boy. He's a charming bully, but he's perfection personified to my mother. Always was, always will be.'

Jack: 'My dad idolised my older sister. It was like he was obsessed with her. Looking back, it was kind of creepy.

He used to talk about how sexy she was, and how if he wasn't her father . . . She couldn't do anything wrong, and everything she wanted she got. If she wanted something, she would sit on his lap and ask him. It's really gross, actually.'

In our experience, where the narcissistic parent is a mother, their golden child is the oldest boy, and if there are no boys, the youngest girl. Where the narcissistic parent is a father, it's usually the oldest girl, or where no girls, the oldest or most independent boy.

Of course, it's not always this way, and anyone can be a golden child, regardless of sex or birth order.

When is a golden child not a golden child? When they're an enmeshed child

When Megan first came to therapy, she described herself as her mother's golden child. 'I could tell her to stop giving out, or to stop fussing, and she accepted it. I was allowed to say no to her and even criticise her in a jokey sort of way. But whenever I got close to someone else, gave someone else a compliment, bought someone else a gift or spent my money on myself, she took it as a personal attack on her.'

Through therapy, Megan stopped viewing her mother as the victim. 'When she'd say how lonely she was, or that she hadn't heard from me in ages, I'd tell her she could always phone me or visit me. She used to get so mad at me. Then, when I refused to pay her bills any more, she said, "You've changed." She even blamed my partner of ten years for

changing me. She used to make me feel so guilty by saying, "I miss how close we were. I wish things could go back to the way they were."'

This is because of something called enmeshment. When a child is enmeshed with their parent, they become one with them – they're not allowed to separate or individuate. It's essentially extreme dependency on both sides but created by the toxic parent who makes themselves central to the child's existence, not allowing them to operate without first considering their parent's needs. Enmeshment suppresses a child's identity and can be mistaken for golden-child status. But whereas the golden child is allowed to separate and reject the narcissistic parent, the enmeshed child isn't.

The narcissistic parent will only accept their child's 'no' when the gain to them is greater than the cost of allowing the child some autonomy.

Megan: 'I used to tell my mum to stop going on about how low my top was or how short my skirt was, but it was only about little things. I thought I could challenge her, but looking back, it wasn't anything really important, I just told her to stop criticising my outfit. I think I made her look good when I looked good, so she didn't mind me telling her to stop.'

When the non-golden/enmeshed child challenges the narcissistic parent beyond what they can tolerate, the parent will make it clear to the child that their place in the family is dependent on their compliance, and that they, the parent, won't hesitate to

punish them for not complying. This will shatter the child's illusion that they are favoured and accepted and destroy their sense of who they are.

The non-golden child now sees that their emotional safety was dependent on suppressing their own needs and working hard to make sure their parent stayed happy. Suddenly, their perceived role is gone, their safety is gone and so is their identity. Rather than being the golden child, accepted in totality, free from accountability, loved – as they'd thought – unconditionally, they are now, in fact, revealed to be something else altogether: an enmeshed child.

The enmeshed child is a sort of silent scapegoat, hidden behind their enmeshment, their safety contingent on their silence and compliance, unlike the typical scapegoat who is louder in their rejection of the treatment and toxicity in the family unit.

The enmeshed child will be a target for mockery, shame and humiliation, much like the scapegoat, but they won't be blamed for all the things that are wrong in the family unit. They will stay close to the abusive parent, meeting all their needs, silencing themselves for fear of abandonment. They stay safe by staying close.

The enmeshed child will experience fantasy bonding, believing their relationship with their parent is loving, kind and caring, and there will be a huge dissonance between the reality of who their parent is, and their own description of them. This idealisation of the narcissistic parent allows the enmeshed child to protect their relationship, meaning they won't have to face the pain and loss of acknowledging the abuse.

The enmeshed child experiences emotional parentification and anchors themselves in the role of protector, confidant,

therapist and advisor to their parent. It is as though they are a forcefield around their parent, protecting them from all attack. But they themselves are not within the protection of that forcefield; instead, they are sacrificed to maintain the protection it offers.

The scapegoat child

Most people who read this book to help their own healing are going to be scapegoat children. The scapegoats are the warriors in the narcissistic family system. They're the rebels, the protestors, the fighters, the truth seekers and the truth speakers. They demand boundaries, respect and autonomy. They ask to be seen, heard and valued. They rage with futile anger when these requests are denied, and they are punished for asking, every single day.

The scapegoat child is sometimes rejected from the moment they're born. They are labelled a 'bad baby' and, from then on, blamed for everything bad that happens in the family. If the golden child hits them, the scapegoat did something to provoke it; if someone knocks over a drink, the narcissistic parent will find some way to pin it on them.

The experience of the scapegoat child could be described as death by a thousand cuts: constant little jibes and jabs, each one individually not enough to complain about, but collectively covering their entire sense of self in wounds. Nothing they do is ever good enough; but at the same time everything they do is too much – they're too demanding, too dominating, too loud, too quiet, too needy, too distant, too selfish, too giving . . . It's insidious and incessant.

Rebecca: 'I was a difficult baby, according to Mum. I was fussy, I complained, I was hard to feed, I never slept. I just cried all the time, and I was very naughty, always causing trouble. She said if she'd had me first, she would never have had another child. When she talks about me being a terrible baby, she also tells me my brother was so good that he lulled her into a false sense of security. Basically, I came along and made her life hell. She said I hated her. I've felt guilty for being like that my whole life, but now I've started questioning it. How could I have done?'

As mentioned earlier, when it comes to the search for self-identity and autonomy, the very first word most children say is 'no'; and prior to verbalising it, a child will clearly communicate it with body language – turning or pulling away, closing their mouth when they are being fed or crying. These are all attempts by a child to establish and assert boundaries with their parent. When they finally say no, they have been saying it for a long time already, and the same is true for the word 'yes'.

By the age of two or three, a child is building their identity further with more boundary setting, expressing their needs and exploring communication, all under the guidance of their primary caregiver. In the healthy family, the child is mirrored, meaning their feelings and needs are validated and engaged with by the caregiver. Their life experience is reflected back to them with acceptance and love. That doesn't mean they are never told no or allowed to do whatever they want. It means there is a balance, and where redirection or correction are needed they are carried out with kindness and compassion,

even explanation – never with shame, humiliation, punishment or abandonment. (The narcissistic parent did not read that parenting book!)

There are further reaches for individuation – separation from their parent – at the ages of seven/eight, eleven/twelve and sixteen/eighteen. At any of these stages, that desperate search for self could land the child in a scapegoat role.

> Jane: 'When I was little, she was a nice mum, she played with me, did everything with me. She loved me and cuddled me. It wasn't until I was eleven that, all of a sudden, she hated me. I just wanted to go to the cinema with my friend and didn't want her to come with us. She was so upset and hurt, and from then on, she criticised me at every opportunity.'

The narcissistic parent sees their child's attempts at autonomy and acts of independence as a personal rejection – an attack against themselves and their parenting. So they project on to the child that these developmentally normal autonomous behaviours and intentions are, instead, attempts to deliberately wound the parent.

The scapegoat child is the most vulnerable to instrumental and emotional parentification (see pp. 117–128), to being used as the family servant, carrying more responsibility than any other child and being punished when they do not meet unreasonable or unreasonably high expectations.

They are asked to jump through hoops of ludicrous magnitude to receive just a tiny breadcrumb of affection or attention. Their achievements are devalued or dismissed, seen

as a direct challenge and threat to the narcissistic parent or even the golden child.

There will be a narrative about the scapegoat that says things like they're dramatic, greedy, lazy, mean, cold-hearted, selfish, self-centred, manipulative – all the very worst of human characteristics. And this narrative will ripple through the whole family, both immediate and extended, with the scapegoat cast in a role of malicious intent, deserving of the treatment bestowed upon them.

The scapegoat is constantly chipped away at and eroded, suppressed and oppressed. They aren't allowed to grow. Everything about them is rejected. It's so hard to express exactly how destructive this is to the chosen scapegoat – the placeholder for everything bad in the family. The internal messages they develop are abhorrent, like acid drops constantly falling on to skin.

Paradoxically, despite their possible natural tendencies towards making themselves seen and heard, there is no real space for the scapegoat to be happy, sad, angry or scared. They have to be muted to prevent attack. But who on earth can stay muted for ever? Their voice is silenced, and they learn that they are fundamentally unlovable from the people who are meant to teach them they are the most amazing thing in existence. The impact on their development is catastrophic.

The scapegoat child rebels against the parent's treatment of them. They fight so hard to be heard and seen, hoping against hope that *this* will be the time they are finally understood and listened to. Alas, all their rebellion does is increase the gaslighting, the devaluing, dismissal and degrading. Every time they stand up for themselves, the narcissistic parent uses it as evidence of their inherent 'badness', and they are shamed and punished for asking for fairness.

When a scapegoat child comes to therapy as an adult, they will likely be struggling with several of the following:

- **Substance misuse** In order to disconnect from the terrible pain and shame of being the worst person in existence, the scapegoat often turns to substances that mask pain or give them Dutch courage.
- **Lack of identity** Having spent so long hiding who they were as a child in order to be accepted, they have lost touch with who they are, and have no sense of self.
- **People pleasing** Believing their entire value to others is in doing things for them, the the scapegoat will have spent all their time and energy meeting everyone's needs but their own.
- **Fear of conflict** Conflict was an opportunity for the narcissistic parent to shame and belittle the scapegoat, to shut them down and remind them of their character flaws.
- **Self-harm** Because the scapegoat was convinced by their narcissistic parent that they are the problem, they give up raging against their emotional abuser and instead rage against themselves in self-loathing and as a coping mechanism for their huge feelings.
- **Emotional dysregulation disorders** (borderline personality disorder, complex post-traumatic stress disorder, and emotionally unstable personality disorder) The scapegoat never learns to emotionally regulate, because to do so, we need our emotions validated in childhood, which, of course, rarely happens for them.
- **Eating disorders** The combination of negative body messages from childhood and the need to self-punish means the scapegoat is susceptible to developing a toxic relationship with food. Not forgetting, of course, that binge-eating disorder is a very real issue.
- **Abusive relationships** Because love has been modelled to them as judgemental, critical, mean, barely tolerating,

domineering and controlling, the scapegoat comes to expect these things from their other relationships. Due to the way we repeat relational patterns, authentic love for them will feel threatening and unfamiliar, even repulsive, and something that can't be trusted. Scapegoats have to learn a new way of being loved, which is one of the hardest aspects of their healing.

- **OCD (obsessive compulsive disorder)** OCD can be best viewed as extreme anxiety. Anxiety is fear, and fear is us trying to save ourselves. Therefore, OCD behaviours are attempts to achieve a sense of control and safety, something the scapegoat so clearly lacks.
- **Depression** Depression can be viewed as two things: a disconnect from self and a lack of meaning. Because the scapegoat has never had an opportunity to know who they are, they haven't found meaning from things that felt authentic to themselves. So they will struggle with depression for those reasons.
- **Anxiety** We develop anxiety because our environment isn't reliable or safe. On that basis alone, the scapegoat will develop it.

Every scapegoat will have a different presentation in therapy. However, they will all be wearing what we call 'trauma boots': wounds and behaviours that weigh down their progress through life, holding them back, behind their peers. They will compare themselves to people their own age and find themselves wanting because they haven't been able to achieve the same things. The scapegoat is unlikely to be aware that they're the scapegoat or have any idea they are weighed down by the trauma boots. And each time they compare themselves unfavourably to their friends, they unwittingly reinforce the message from childhood that they aren't good enough and won't amount to anything.

Who is the scapegoat child?

> Rebecca: 'Any time anything went wrong, it was my fault – even if I wasn't there, somehow it was my fault. If my sister broke a plate, it was my fault. If my brother was in trouble at school, she would find a way to blame me. It's completely ridiculous now I think about it, but it was absolute hell living in it.'

The scapegoat child for a narcissistic mother is typically the oldest girl. This is because they're the first to disappoint the narcissist by seeking autonomy and saying no, and not living up to the projected expectation of who they should be. Other children in the system see the reaction to this and learn to keep quiet or enmesh themselves (see p. 142). For a narcissistic father, it's a little less predictable, but it's usually the youngest boy, or the boy who is not 'man' enough – again, the child who seeks autonomy and disappoints by not living up to the projection cast up on them.

This isn't an exact science, and, of course, there are different experiences – it's just a reflection of what we see in practice. Regardless, though, when someone calls out the behaviour, it's typically a one-way ticket to the scapegoat role – because those who refuse to collude are discarded and smeared.

Parent roles

There are a number of roles that parents take in the toxic narcissistic family system. Here are some of the types we expect to see.

Enabling parent

On our podcast we read out the letters sent in by the adult children of narcissistic parents. They usually focus on one parent whose behaviour is clearly abusive. We look at the behaviour, explain the abuse and the motivation behind it and validate how emotionally abusive it is. But we are always left with one question hanging in the air: where was the other parent?

Anyone listening to the abusive parent in action may well interpret the other parent's silence as non-abusive. Because they don't join in with it, they come across as the good parent, the trustworthy parent, the safe parent.

Unfortunately, however, that isn't usually the case. They may not be attacking, but they're not protecting either. A parent's job is to protect their children from harm, to provide a safe environment for them to grow up in and make them feel loved, safe and secure. If they are not doing this, this is an act of neglect – they are not doing their job.

The enabling parent might say things like, 'Oh, you know how they are. Just say sorry and get it over with.' Essentially, they will ask the child to tolerate the emotional abuse, to accept the blame for it and to keep the peace for the enabling parent's own sake. Rather than protect their child, they prioritise their own peace of mind.

In a healthy family dynamic, if a parent has said or done something unkind or hurtful, the other parent will step in and either protect the child in the moment or discuss it privately with the other parent and then suggest they apologise. They would not try to blame the child and ask the child to apologise, holding them responsible for their parent's behaviour to keep the peace. An enabling parent, however, will abandon the child to protect themselves and, in so doing, they are complicit in the abuse.

In a narcissistic family system, the narcissist has the most power. They are the dominant one, perhaps with financial as well as emotional control. So isn't the other parent being abused, too? We see that. We understand and validate it. However, it is still their responsibility as the victim with most agency to protect those who cannot protect themselves: the children.

The enabling parent convinces their child that they're in it together, that they're fighting a common enemy, soldiers in the trenches. But that's horsesh*t. A parent shouldn't be looking to be at arms with their child against their partner. The child shouldn't be at war at all. Nor, indeed, should the enabling parent who has the agency and legal right (age, earning capacity, ability to drive, rent a flat, seek financial aid, approach welfare charities for help . . .) to leave the situation – which the child cannot do. It is a huge betrayal by the enabling parent to make it seem as though their child has as much responsibility for keeping the peace as they do.

When the narcissistic parent is a single parent

When a narcissistic parent is a single parent, there is no other adult to shield their children from their behaviour or even witness it. This is especially difficult where there is a single parent and an only child.

If there is an absent parent, they will likely be smeared, constantly and consistently. If the child shows any bond or preference for the other parent, they will be shamed for it, and the smear campaign against the absent parent will be ramped up. The problem here is that narcissistic parents are very good at playing the victim, and because the court system is woefully uneducated about emotional abuse, the parent can easily manipulate others into

believing they're the injured party and into awarding them more control over children and assets.

The narcissistic parent will then go on to make it very difficult for their child (or children) to have a relationship with the other parent – partly due to the smear campaign, but also because they make the child feel very guilty for wanting to be with them. They position the child as their own protector, using emotional parentification to trauma bond the child to them so tightly that they can't move without provoking intense feelings of fear, obligation and guilt (FOG).

Ultimately, no one escapes the impact of a narcissistic parent. Everyone has wounds to show, although some won't be aware of them – until, that is, the scapegoat wakes up and starts telling everyone about it like the warrior they are, fighting the war for truth and love, sacrificing themselves, if necessary, in the process. They're the bravest people we know.

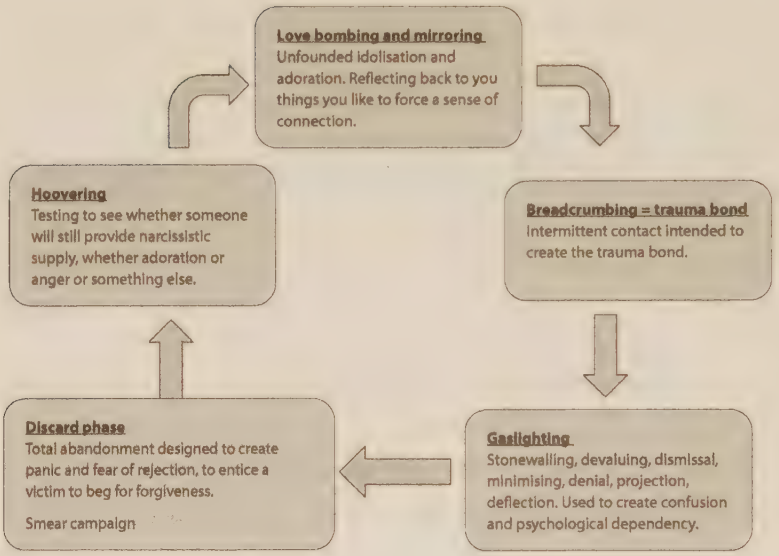
CHAPTER 8

The Narcissist's Cycle of Abuse

The narcissist will always convince the child that it is their response to the abuse that's the problem.

There is a distinctive cycle of abuse that narcissists use to gain and keep control of their victims. We see it on repeat in every client who comes to us. Often, when we show clients the cycle pictured below, it shatters the illusion that they are the problem, as they recognise what they have experienced is a systemic, intentional set of behaviours. Seeing the cycle so starkly laid out shows them that this is a 'thing'. And it's a thing we see, know, understand and – most importantly, so we can protect ourselves against it in the future – we can predict.

1. Love bombing and mirroring
2. Breadcrumbing and creation of trauma bond
3. Gaslighting – stonewalling, devaluing, dismissal, minimising, denial, projection and deflection
4. Discarding
5. Hoovering


Love bombing and mirroring
Unfounded idolisation and adoration. Reflecting back to you things you like to force a sense of connection.
Breadcrumbing = trauma bond
Intermittent contact intended to create the trauma bond.
Gaslighting
Stonewalling, devaluing, dismissal, minimising, denial, projection, deflection. Used to create confusion and psychological dependency.
Discard phase
Total abandonment designed to create panic and fear of rejection, to entice a victim to beg for forgiveness.
Smear campaign
Hoovering
Testing to see whether someone will still provide narcissistic supply, whether adoration or anger or something else.

1. Love bombing and mirroring

Love bombing and mirroring are two behaviours that the narcissist uses to create a forced connection, a bond between them and their victim.

> Rebecca: 'When I met my ex, it was like a whirlwind. She swept me off my feet, she adored me, she said I was amazing and the girl she had always dreamed of meeting. She was into the same music and movies as me, and we both loved the idea of travelling the world. It was so intense – it was magical. I just felt loved and safe and seen for the first time in my life. It was us against the world. It was amazing.'

Love bombing from a narcissistic parent is the projection of perfectionism on to the child (for more on projection, see pp. 95–8). It means the child then needs to live up to this perfect personality projected on to them. Inevitably, however, at some point, the child will fall from their pedestal by saying or doing something to crack the illusion of the projection. They will disappoint the narcissist and feel like a failure, just for being human.

The love-bombing phase in a romantic relationship with a narcissist usually lasts about three months. That's typically how long the narcissist can sustain the level of energy required to mirror their victim, convincing them of a relationship built on connection (whereas it is really built on projection). Love bombing is something we see more obviously in romantic relationships, but narcissistic parents will use it, too, when they feel the need to remind their children of the love they can offer when they choose to.

When we are involved with someone romantically, we might expect that they will share big feelings with us after knowing us for a while, with a foundation of connection and knowledge on which to base these things. Love bombing, however, is idolisation and idealisation on an epic scale. It's putting a person on a pedestal within a few days or weeks of knowing them (although the things they are saying might well be true). It's showering them with adulation and adoration and using phrases like, 'You're the best thing that ever happened to me,' 'I would be lost without you,' 'I've never felt like this about anyone,' 'You are amazing; you are perfect just the way you are.' The idealisation might also be accompanied by a showering of gifts, kindness, acts of service – anything at all that makes someone feel special and seen.

It's worth noting here that some schools of thought say there can be healthy love bombing. That would look like *sustained* love,

admiration, affection and adoration that wouldn't wane, as it does with the narcissistic version. For the purposes of this book, however, when we discuss love bombing, we're referring to the toxic kind.

In friendships, love bombing might look similar, involving getting very close very quickly, being overly helpful, coffee dates, lots of messages, expressions such as 'you're amazing' and excessive attention. But it's less effusive than the romantic version.

In the parent–child relationship, love bombing is usually less visible, presenting more like breadcrumbs of love, pride and affection. Because the attachment relationship is so entrenched, less love bombing is needed to force reconnection with the child than would be in a romantic relationship. However, as with most things, this isn't the rule. Love bombing from parents will be a different experience for everyone. Some can be overly generous and effusive and kind, but this is typically hoovering behaviour (see p. 180).

One thing to be very careful of is this: it's easy to mistake effusive pride talk to others for evidence of being seen and respected and loved. However, while the narcissistic parent will often speak highly of all their children to people outside the family, this isn't evidence of those things, and it isn't love bombing either. This is simply image maintenance on the part of the narcissistic parent and an opportunity to bask in the reflected glory of their child's achievements. It is in no way an indication that they value their child; it is about them and them alone.

It's so important to know that, unless the narcissistic parent is sure they will be agreed with, they are unlikely to ever speak badly of their children, because it would make them look bad.

Still, it can be so confusing when someone hears from a third party that their abusive, narcissistic parent has been singing

their praises. It reinforces the idea that it's them that's the problem, not the parent, because parental love is being shown to outsiders, but at home there's still shame and punishment for existing.

When someone with a healthy attachment style experiences love bombing, they're turned off by it. It feels insincere, creepy, suffocating and off-putting. They may not know why, but they can sense it isn't right. They don't trust it and are typically repelled by it. The sad fact of love bombing is that it only works on people who have an attachment wound: the fallout from having been unseen, unheard and unloved as they are.

> Rebecca: 'My mother laid down the tracks so my partner could drive the train straight over them. She taught me to accept abuse as though it was love.'

Love bombing can trigger a huge hormonal response. It stimulates dopamine (the reward hormone that makes us feel good and happy and gooey) and oxytocin (the bonding hormone that gives us the feeling we get when we see babies or puppies or kittens – any young animal). These two hormones are addictive, designed to make us do things that are supposedly good for us, over and over again. For example, when we eat, we release dopamine, which reminds us to eat again. That great feeling we get when we complete a task? Dopamine. Our reach for dopamine is incessant, so when someone grows up in emotional abuse and abandonment and hears, 'Hey, you're pretty great!' the flood of dopamine will be huge. Of course, they'll want to feel it again, so they'll go back for more. Which is why those with unseen/

unheard/unvalued and not-good-enough wounds from childhood are so vulnerable to it.

Mirroring

We all do mirroring all the time, and it's how we relate to others. It's reflecting (like a mirror!) someone's feelings, values, interests, even body language back to them to show we are interested and connected.

The benefit of mirroring can be seen particularly clearly in babies and small children. Parents use it to show their children that their feelings are valid and valuable. By mirroring a child's emotions to them, they learn to identify and regulate them.

We use mirroring to connect as adults, too. If you say, 'I love peanut butter,' and I say, 'I love peanut butter, too!' we instantly have something to share. If instead I say, 'I hate peanut butter,' it could potentially shut the whole conversation down and lead to disconnection.

So mirroring is not always toxic. It can be authentic and is also a feature of relationships that are genuine and healthy. The sense it creates of connectedness, shared interests and values generates a feeling of safety.

When used by a narcissist, however, mirroring is weaponised (isn't everything?). For example, they will love everything their victim loves – bands, hobbies, interests, habits, political opinions – to force a feeling of connection. And by exploiting the safety this generates, they lure the victim into a false sense of security. Combined with love bombing, mirroring reinforces the bond that the narcissist is imposing. Add to this their use of breadcrumbing, and something known as the trauma bond develops.

2. Breadcrumbing and trauma bonding

Jane: 'It's like he forgets I exist; my mum does it, too. Everything will be absolutely fine and then they go silent. They don't answer my calls, or text me back, and it's horrid. It makes me panic, actually – like this huge sinking feeling in my gut. I'm scared and tearful, and sometimes I find myself begging them to reply. When they finally do, the relief is instant, and I wonder what I was worried about in the first place. I feel a bit silly, really, because I was obviously making a mountain out of a molehill and everything was fine. It's weird how they both do it, though. Why is that?'

Breadcrumbing is the use of intermittent contact to reinforce the bond between two people. It might be best described as blowing hot and cold or playing hard to get. One minute they're sending messages, flirting, and the next they can't be seen for dust. It's a constant push/pull; at best, it's disrespectful and at worst, chronically manipulative.

Breadcrumbing in narcissism occurs after the love-bombing and mirroring stage. When the victim has inevitably fallen from their pedestal – because they either criticised or disagreed with the narcissist, essentially disappointing them – they are met with punishment in the form of breadcrumbing to build and reinforce their dependency on the narcissist: the trauma bond.

This can happen in all types of relationships. This is how it works with adults: the victim has experienced all the gorgeous, squishy, happy, lovely effects of love bombing, which made them euphoric, intoxicated, distracted, feeling wonderful. The world

seems brighter and more colourful. Hope reigns over the future. Years and years of life in the cold, desolate place of abandonment are over, and the sun is finally shining, bathing the victim in warmth and happiness.

Then the narcissist rips these feeling away. The victim is shoved back into that awful cold, dark place, but now it's even worse, because before, they could pretend they were OK in the cold, but now they've felt the warmth, they know what they're missing.

When the narcissist then sends a message or makes a call, all those lovely, squishy feelings come rushing back, coupled with intense relief to be in the warmth again. And so it goes on: hot, cold, hot, cold, until the victim is so desperate for warmth that they manage their behaviour, thoughts and feelings to avoid being shoved out in the cold again.

It's bad enough when this happens in a romantic relationship or a friendship, but when it happens to a child it's hideously destructive. When a parent weaponises their love like this, they set up a model that their child will accept and assume is normal in all their relationships, but especially in love. They learn that love is not a permanent banquet to be feasted on, so that you're never hungry; rather, it means being close to starvation all the time, surviving on tiny crumbs occasionally thrown your way. Those crumbs seem like roast dinners, but in reality they're mouldy and stale and never, ever fill them up.

Breadcrumbing in adult relationships utilises the pattern previously established by a narcissistic or emotionally abusive parent. It exploits the trauma wounds of emotional abandonment, rejection and shame left by the narcissistic parent.

Both breadcrumbing and love bombing provoke the same level of hormonal response as heroin use. Both release dopamine and oxytocin, and the withdrawal of love bombing is as painful as

withdrawal from heroin. When love bombing stops and the victim goes into that cold, dark place, they go into dopamine and oxytocin withdrawal. So when that long-awaited contact does arrive, the physical hormonal response is massive. It's completely overwhelming, eradicating any fear and doubt the victim was feeling, providing relief and peace at having the connection back.

It is this physical response that creates the trauma bond.

The trauma bond

Rebecca: 'I don't know why the hell my ex has this hold over me. I don't get it. I know she's toxic. I know she hurts me like no one else has (well, except maybe my bitch of a mother), but I can't seem to let go. I can't say no. When I haven't heard from her for a while, I'm fine, but the minute my phone dings and her name pops up, I'm right back into her. I can't bear the idea of her being with someone else, even though I don't want her back. I can't move on. She sucks me back in, even when I know she's just going to destroy me. I'm an intelligent, accomplished person. I know what she is but still I go back. It's utterly ludicrous.'

The trauma bond is what keeps a victim in relationship with a narcissist or any abuser. Although it can manifest incredibly powerfully with a partner, and indeed friends, it's particularly acute with a narcissistic parent because we have a natural bond to our parent anyway.

A trauma bond is created when our trauma – our insecure attachment wounds, fear of rejection, self-loathing, lack of identity, crushed self-esteem – are weaponised to bond us to the abuser.

When the relationship is 'good' – when we are being love bombed, adored and adulated – our trauma wounds are soothed and feel better. Finally, someone sees and loves us, and we are willing to tolerate all sorts of behaviour for that. So we do. So scared are we of losing the good feelings, as intermittent as they might be, that we learn to silence ourselves to avoid those wounds being touched. We sit in hope that they will be the person they said they were, rather than the person they show us they are.

The trauma bond is incredibly difficult to break, but it is possible. We will look at how to do this in Chapter 15, but before we even try, we have to make peace with rejection, build our identity, heal the wounds that the love bombing has been temporarily soothing, and face the grief and pain of having being raised by or being in relationship with someone who couldn't or wouldn't love us without condition.

3. Gaslighting

The term gaslighting comes from the play and film *Gaslight*. (It is so good at explaining the behaviours that it is intensely triggering. Maybe give it a miss. Or not – we don't want to tell you what to do . . . we want you to grow your autonomy!)

Gaslighting is an umbrella term for a number of behaviours, all of which create psychological confusion in the victim, so that they no longer trust or identify with their own feelings or perception of events and situations. Long-term exposure to gaslighting is known to cause depression and anxiety and can even lead to completion of suicide. It erodes a person's sense of self, their identity and their voice, until they are a mere shell of a being – that's if they were ever allowed to be one in the first place.

Gaslighting uses manipulative tactics to lead the victim into questioning their perception, judgement, emotions and memory. It might be done through words alone or through manipulating your environment.

Rebecca: 'There was this one time I saw her in a restaurant at lunch time with another woman. I was walking past and saw her through the window, I took a photo, because I knew she would deny it. I confronted her that night when she got home and she denied it straight away. Then she asked me if I was stalking her, and what was wrong with me. She called me paranoid and crazy, saying she was worried about me because it wasn't normal to be this concerned about a partner cheating. When I showed her the photo, her face dropped but only for a moment, until she caught herself and just denied outright it was her. She was stood in front of me wearing the exact same clothes, with the exact same hairstyle, denying it was her. I felt like I was going mad. She was so assured and concrete in her rightness, that I figured I had to be wrong, and maybe I *was* being paranoid.'

Jane: 'It was a running joke that I was always losing my keys and wallet. It was like they had feet. Everyone said I would lose my head if it wasn't screwed on. My husband started getting really worried about my memory, and suggested I should maybe see a doctor or something. It turned out he was moving them all along. I was living with a terror I had dementia, and he was moving my

things around as a joke. I mean, he thought it was funny, and I know I'm overreacting, but I just didn't think it was funny at all.'

Some typical gaslighting expressions

The expressions below hold context. They will have been used to force compliance and thwart any challenge to authority, so silencing requests for needs to be met and preventing a reach for autonomy.

Gaslighting phrases in childhood from a parent	**Gaslighting phrases in adulthood from a friend/ partner/colleague**
'I know you better than you know yourself.'	'You can't take a joke.'
'You're so dramatic.'	'You're so sensitive.'
'Stop crying or I'll give you something to cry about.'	'Why do you always have to overreact?'
'After everything I do for you!'	'I can't say anything to you.'
'You've been difficult since the day you were born.'	'Why are you so over the top all the time?'
'If you don't do as I say, I'll leave you here.'	'It didn't happen like that; you're making it up.'
'You're making me sad.'	'Nobody else realises what it's like being with you. They would give me a medal if they did.'

'You're such a show-off.'	'You're imagining things.'
'Who do you think you are?'	'You always have to twist things to make me look bad.'
'Stop making such a fuss!'	You've taken it the wrong way.'
'Why is it always *you* complaining?'	'You're just like your (abusive) parent.'
'Stop asking questions and just do as I say.'	'Nobody else has a problem with me; it's just you.'
'If anyone else knew you as I do, they would think the same thing.'	'You're so paranoid. It's ridiculous – you need help.'
'I'm not mad, I'm disappointed.'	'You only ever think of yourself.'
'You're so ungrateful.'	'You always forget things; there must be something wrong with your memory.'
'You're so cold-hearted.'	'You always let me down when it suits you.'

Behaviours associated with gaslighting

Gaslighting consists of several behaviours: stonewalling, devaluing, dismissal, minimising, denial, projection and deflection. Let's break these down.

Stonewalling

Stonewalling is when someone either refuses to engage with another's emotions or squishes them to assert dominance and superiority. It is a shame-inducing, humiliating behaviour that

can also be described as emotional abandonment, and it is usually done in response to threat or because attention is being diverted away from the narcissist.

Rebecca: 'I'll never forget when I got 99 per cent in my Spanish exam. I was so excited and proud of myself. I was eleven at the time, and at boarding school. I literally ran to the phone to call her and tell her. I thought, This is it! She's going to be proud of me! Looking back, I was *so* hopeful. I was brimming over with hope, pride, excitement. Top of the class at something, finally. I was fizzing with it all, bouncing, as I waited for her to answer the phone. When she did, I blurted out: "MUM – GUESS WHAT?" She sneered, "Stop shouting, Rebecca. You're always so loud! What's so important?" "I got 99 per cent in my Spanish exam!" I waited for her to respond, knowing she was going to be so excited and proud of me. I can't tell you what it felt like when she responded, with contempt: "What did you get wrong?" I was crushed. I can still feel how it felt now. I think that's the moment I knew I would never be good enough.'

Rebecca did brilliantly in her exam, which was evidence of her being clever and dedicated to her work. That, in turn, threatened her mother's sense of superiority, so instead of congratulating her daughter, she refused to engage with her excitement, and removed it altogether by focusing on the 1 per cent Rebecca dropped.

Rebecca had been speeding down a highway of happiness when her mother threw a giant brick wall in her path stopping her dead in her tracks. She then prompted

a feeling of shame in Rebecca, who was already aware that her mother didn't think she was good enough, by asking what she got wrong. To assert dominance and superiority, Rebecca's mother exploited the not-good-enough wound that she had created in her daughter.

Using stonewalling on children has a long-term impact. It leads to toxic shame (see p. 68) and mistrust around the child's feelings and felt experience. The impact can manifest in many ways, but one can be that any extreme feelings (whether happiness or sadness, pride or anger) trigger a huge shame response and the child of the narcissist ends up self-stonewalling. In other words, they use their critical inner voice to shame and berate themselves for whatever feeling they're having (as with self-gaslighting; but self-gaslighting is minimising your own feelings, whereas self-stonewalling is shaming them). The mantra of the child of a narcissist could therefore be summed up as 'too much, never enough': too dramatic, too sensitive, too loud, too passionate, too happy, too sad, but never good enough – at anything – for the narcissistic parent. And this is where the shame sits for the adult child of a narcissist, controlling and paralysing them with the fear that someone else might reject their feelings the same way their narcissistic parent did.

Stonewalling in adult relationships has the same impact as in childhood. The victim is silenced and shamed about their feelings, humiliated, often in front of others, and essentially controlled to ensure that they do not overshadow others, especially their abuser.

Sitting with our feelings, showing ourselves compassion and empathy for having them and just allowing them to exist can be really helpful in combatting feelings of shame, even though this

can be hard to do at first. Stonewalling teaches us our feelings are embarrassing, inappropriate, weak, pathetic, childish and shameful. Those are the feelings Rebecca experienced when her mother was so scathing about her exam result. And, as an adult, Rebecca automatically had those feelings whenever she got happy or excited about something, or even sad or disappointed. Any feeling that was stonewalled in childhood is self-stonewalled in adulthood.

We can see when someone has been stonewalled. When they get passionate about something, they immediately apologise for their excitement. They've learned somewhere that their joy and thrill are shameful, embarrassing and just generally 'too much' for the listener, so they stonewall themselves and apologise for their exuberance. It's devastatingly sad to see.

Devaluing

> Jane: 'He always criticises me; even when he's saying something nice, there seems to be a criticism in it. Nothing I do is up to scratch. He puts me down all the time. It's getting soul-destroying – I know he's trying to help me to be a better person, but it really grinds me down.'

Devaluing behaviour is used to make someone feel less than. It's a succession of negative comments, put-downs and criticisms, often made as throwaway statements – even pleasantly. For example, 'How exciting about your course. Who did you have to bribe to get on it, haha . . .' It's passive aggressive and mean but dressed up as innocent. It might come into the bracket of 'negging' – a backhanded compliment, such as: 'That dress is lovely. I'm sure it would suit you if you lost a bit of weight.'

Devaluing makes people question their worth and, drip fed over time, it leads them to feel that they are lucky if anyone wants to be around them at all because they're so awful. It erodes self-worth and self-esteem, chipping away, until they feel they have no value whatsoever.

Dismissal and minimising

> Jack: 'If I told my dad I was upset by the way he spoke to me or treated me he always said I was overreacting, making a fuss, being a princess, that sort of thing. He never took my feelings seriously. "There are worse things happening in the world," he said. So I stopped telling him anything because he just made me feel bad for feeling upset in the first place.'

Dismissal is another way in which a narcissist (and other emotional abusers) confuses and disempowers their victims. It works by brushing aside and minimising the victim's emotional responses.

When a parent minimises their child's feelings, the child feels silly, humiliated and ashamed. In our practices, clients often say things like, 'I should feel this way about this thing.' However, as therapists, we are not concerned with what you *should* feel – we want to know what you actually *do* feel. When you 'should' your feelings, you shame them, so that on top of feelings you are already struggling with, you start feeling guilty, too.

Dismissing and minimising might sound like the following:

- 'You're overreacting.'
- 'Stop making a fuss.'
- 'You're so oversensitive.'

- 'Get over it; it was just a joke.'
- 'Why do you have to drag up the past all the time?'

These responses tell someone that their reaction is wrong, that their emotions are invalid and that there's something wrong with them for feeling that way.

Dismissal and minimising create confusion, self-doubt, fear and guilt. They make people feel scared to share their feelings again, because having them dismissed and minimised feels like rejection. This is one of the paper cuts of emotional abuse – and combined with all the other cuts it makes a deep, deep wound, full of infection and pain. It's digging out that infection and healing the wound that allows someone to make peace with rejection and form healthy, safe, intimate relationships. We will explore this healing in Chapter 13.

Denial

> Jack: 'I remember telling my dad that he shouldn't take my money out of my little money box. He completely denied ever doing it, even though I saw him with my own eyes. He stood there and made it look like I was crazy for even accusing him. In front of everyone, he stood there saying, "I've no idea what you're talking about. I would never take your money from you. I just don't know why you could think such a thing." But I *saw* him. Everyone believed him and said I was mean and cold for suggesting he would do something like that. It was awful.'

Because narcissists utilise denial so assuredly, arguing with one is like arguing with a brick wall. It's annoying to recognise the skill

in this behaviour, but we must, so that we can protect ourselves against it.

When the narcissist sits in denial, they are absolute. They won't concede on a single thing. They blanket deny and are so convincing that it's hard to keep up the fight. Because they refuse to self-reflect in any considered way and are so defended, they are intransigent.

When someone sits so firmly and rigidly in their position, trying to reason, argue or challenge with evidence is impossible and will not only cause huge frustration, but also lead to the victim questioning their own judgement, knowledge and perception, their feelings and their reality – which is, of course, the intention.

As an adult, fighting against denial at this level is infuriating, disempowering and can make someone feel as though they're crazy. For a child it means total annihilation. Over time, sustained exposure to this denial erodes any sense of self-trust, and leaves the person disempowered and confused with no way of challenging the behaviour. They become unable to trust their own perception, so that after a while the tiniest doubt in their version of events makes them surrender to the narcissist's.

When a child grows up with denial weaponised against them (because a narcissistic parent regularly employs it with their children), they never learn to trust their own perception. They are always convinced they are in the wrong, just because the parent tells them so.

The adult child of the narcissist is unable to trust their own judgement, too, or even their feelings, because they have lost touch with them, and become used to relying on others to tell them whether what they are feeling is correct. This makes them extremely vulnerable to further emotional abuse – because someone with nefarious

intentions will exploit that self-doubt and weaponise it against them.

Projection

> Rebecca: 'My ex constantly accused me of cheating and would demand to see my phone and look through my messages. She was so paranoid. There was literally no reason for her to think I was cheating, so I put it down to what she had said about her ex and feeling insecure. It turned out, in the end, that she had slept with loads of people behind my back. She was literally accusing me of doing what she was doing. I can't believe I didn't see it at the time.'

As we saw in Chapter 5, when someone projects on to someone else, they accuse that person of their own behaviour, which makes the victim feel confused and self-doubting. When this happens repeatedly, the person develops a shaky sense of self, cannot trust their own judgement or perception and becomes highly suggestible and vulnerable.

At first, when someone accuses us of something we know we didn't do, it's easy to defend. However, as can be seen with the false confessions gained from coercive interrogation, persistent suggestion that an individual has done something, *even when they know they haven't*, will start to cause them to question themselves and believe they might have done it, making them feel, at the very least, hopeless and disempowered, constantly having to defend themselves against false accusations that paint them in a bad light.

In childhood, being continuously subjected to negative narratives and accusations becomes part of an internal belief

system – 'I must be manipulative because my mother/father always told me I managed to get my way every time I wanted something.'

As children, we believe the things projected on to us because how does a child know any different? They trust their parent's perception, especially when reinforced with phrases like, 'I'm a grown up; I know better than you' or, 'I know you better than you know yourself.' The parent is projecting an intention on to the child and this makes them question their motives and behaviour and assume the worst about themselves. In turn, that makes them apologise for taking up space in the world, because they believe they've tricked everyone into thinking they're someone they are not, and if everyone knew just how manipulative, selfish and bad they were, no one would like them at all.

Remember: projection is confession. It tells you more about someone else's thoughts, feelings and behaviour than your own.

Deflection

Jane: 'Whenever my mum and I disagree, we start off talking about the issue, but it goes from me saying, "This upset me," to her saying, "Well, my feelings are more hurt." Say I'm upset because she cancelled babysitting last minute, and I'm asking her to give me a bit more notice in the future. All of a sudden, I'm defending myself because now she's angry with me, and it's about something that happened ages ago and I had no idea about it at the time. It's crazy. It means we never seem to be able to sort anything out, because we never stay on topic.'

Deflection is designed to divert and distract. When the narcissist is confronted about their own behaviour, they'll use any means necessary to deflect attention away from their wrongdoing, avoid responsibility and accountability and turn the spotlight on to something else, including the victim.

Deflection looks like this (Jack and his mother are having a disagreement about his mother commenting on Jack's daughter's body):

Jack: 'Mum, I've asked you not to say anything about her weight, but you did it again. It's not OK, please stop it.'

Mum: 'I didn't say anything! She's lying!' [Denial and projection]

Jack: 'I heard you say it. Don't do it again.'

Mum: 'Why were you spying on me? That's sneaky, Jack. You shouldn't be listening in to private conversations.' [Deflection and possible projection]

Jack's mum was deflecting attention away from her behaviour and instead turning it on to Jack's. She also might have been accusing Jack of doing something that she herself was doing (i.e. sneaking around, listening to private conversations), which was projection.

Deflection is all about distraction. It usually forces the victim into a position of defence, so they end up focused on their own innocence, rather than holding the narcissist accountable.

To counter deflection, we can try to keep the focus on the topic, while still acknowledging their point by saying, 'We can talk about that in a minute, but right now, we are talking about this.' Though it will typically result in frustration and anger from the narcissist, it means that boundaries are held, and the victim is not bullied into compliance or diverted away from requesting accountability form the narcissist.

It's worth noting that all these behaviours support each other, working together to create an environment where someone

questions their own perception and reality, therefore becoming more and more dependent on their abuser.

4. Discarding

In the discard phase, the narcissist literally discards their victim, cutting all contact, sending them into a panic response. The point here is to send the victim into their fear-and-fawn state, so they're begging for affection and attention. It's complete abandonment and triggers the abandonment and rejection wounds built in childhood.

The discard phase is incredibly painful and scary for the victim. The feelings of loss and abandonment are debilitating. However, it's also the point at which someone has the most chance of seeing the behaviour used to dominate and control them – because it's not being utilised against them every day. In discard, they can start breaking the trauma bond, and clearing the FOG (fear, obligation and guilt – see p. 72) weaponised against them by the narcissist. Away from constant gaslighting, a sense of self starts tó grow, behaviour is questioned and situations can be seen in a different light. In the discard phase the switch can be flipped to shine the floodlights on the narcissist's behaviour, exposing it for what it is. Situations, lies and behaviour can be reframed and responsibility for them shifted back where it belongs.

What many of our clients struggle with, though, is that once the switch is flipped it's impossible to turn that light off and they start seeing the behaviour everywhere. It can make them feel confused and overwhelmed and lead to them questioning their perception again. Flipping on the light switch is intensely liberating for the victim in many senses, but also brings with it a huge grief at the realisation that they've been surrounded by unhealthy, exploitative

people for so long that it's been normalised, and the people they'd thought loved them were really benefiting from their silence. We will explore this more in Chapter 9.

Smear campaign

When the narcissist feels their superiority or image is under threat, whether that's real or not, they will strike first by devaluing the person they feel is threatening them. The smear campaign is present throughout the cycle, but ramps up in the discard phase in adult relationships (in childhood, the narcissistic parent implements it against their scapegoat child continuously).

They create a narrative accepted by the entire family, including extended family. It says the scapegoat child really is all the things the narcissistic parent has projected on to them. This smear campaign is like a pre-emptive attack for the day the scapegoat starts speaking up and speaking out, calling out the abuse and the behaviour. Because who's going to believe the 'difficult' child? The 'combative', 'lazy', 'selfish', 'ungrateful', 'demanding', 'self-centred', 'cold-hearted' child?

The smear campaign holds no bars. The narcissist doesn't care whether what they're saying is truthful or not, they just want to retain superiority. They will accuse people of being abusive, mentally ill, illegal drug abuse, affairs, stealing, lying – anything – without a shred of truth to support it.

They essentially use the smear campaign to isolate the victim and leave them out in the cold with no support, and they will hold power, dominance and control over any mutual friends and family. The smear campaign is utterly devastating. It costs people so very much (jobs, relationships, money, reputation, for example) and is seriously hard to tolerate.

We've heard stories of a narcissistic parent calling their scapegoat child's place of work and telling the boss they're stealing or on drugs or similar to sabotage their child's job. But it could also be as simple as telling everyone, 'I don't know why she's not talking to me. I guess she's used me for everything she could.'

It is also, however, a bullsh*t filter. If you've heard our podcast, you will have heard Helen talking about the bullsh*t filter – a way to spot where someone is healthy or not in relationship. If someone is willing to listen to one side of a story and, knowing both parties, not stop to think, Maybe I should get their version of events, then they're not using critical thinking, and they're not healthy. It may be they're fulfilling their own need for rescuing someone and engaged in the drama, rather than finding the truth. They may also be in denial about their own abusive behaviour, or any abuse they are tolerating themselves.

The pain of the smear campaign is that relationships the victim believed to be loving and caring are revealed to be easily lost and fragile on the basis of a lot of mistruths from the narcissist. This is especially painful for a scapegoat child, due to the injustice-wound being activated by the experience of this loss.

A childhood filled with unfair judgements, accusations, being overlooked and denied affection and praise creates a huge wound of injustice. It makes someone feel powerless and frustrated, and when a smear campaign over which they have no control is then launched against them, every single unfairness they've ever experienced is triggered. It's utterly devastating. And there's little they can do but weather the storm and wait for the narcissist to move to a different target, at which they will likely feel a mix of relief and guilt. It's truly awful.

When it comes to holding the narcissist accountable, one thing our clients are often scared of exploring is legal recourse. They're

afraid of the behaviour escalating, but also of wounding the narcissist. Their fear, obligation and guilt (FOG) have been weaponised against them and the family narrative is often that nobody is allowed to challenge or hold the narcissist accountable (and if anyone does, they're morally corrupt, mean, evil and self-serving). At this juncture, we just want to remind readers that they are not responsible for the pain someone feels as a consequence of their own behaviour.

Now for the next stage in the cycle . . .

5. Hoovering

Just when it's all gone quiet, some recovery has started, the self is growing and boundaries are evolving, the narcissist reappears. It's like they've got a sixth sense. They seem to know exactly the right time to try to suck their victim back into their sh*t show of a relationship.

Narcissistic supply is where the narcissist is looking to get an emotional need met to fulfil their sense of importance and superiority. They use others to feed ('supply') their emotions – to give them adulation, adoration, even anger and hatred. They do this because they need external sources for all emotions because they cannot generate their own sense of self-worth.

We all feel good when someone praises us, but we don't all need *all* people to do that *all* the time at a cost to themselves. And a relationship doesn't depend on excessive praise and recognition. But for the narcissist it does. And with hoovering, they are testing to see if they can still get a supply from people who have given it before.

The biggest mistake people make with hoovering is thinking it's about getting nice things. And often it is. It might be a text saying, 'I miss you so much; we were so good together,' or a simple, 'Was just thinking about you. How are you?' It might be flowers, a

gift – ultimately, something unexpected and out of the blue, testing to see whether the victim will engage.

When the narcissist needs someone to be the placeholder for emotions they can't show to whoever is in front of them, they will use a previous victim for that honour. It means they will bait someone into an argument, just so they can unleash anger and feel better for themselves. It's nothing at all to do with the victim; it's everything to do with the narcissist not being able to self-regulate or show their real self to the person in front of them.

Hoovering is, of course, difficult to resist. All those feelings that bowled someone over in the love-bombing phase can flood back because of the trauma bond, not to mention the narratives they were programmed with to meet the needs of others above their own. And so to deny engagement, acknowledgement and more makes them feel selfish, mean, cruel – all the nasty things.

This is especially so when it comes to receiving a gift. Social etiquette dictates that if someone sends us a gift, we should contact them to say thank you. The narcissist exploits that social rule and uses a lack of response as fodder for any smear campaign they might be executing against their victim. Spoiler alert: nobody has to say thank you for a gift that is intended to manipulate them into taking action they don't want to take. Often, people will just send hoovering gifts back or sell or donate them to charity. And sometimes they keep them. Any of these is just fine.

How is it we don't see through the behaviour until either someone points it out or a catalytic event shows it all up in a moment (such as a wedding, birth, graduation)? It's because we repeat what we know – the repeating relational patterns we looked at in Chapter 5. The rules of relationships we learn in childhood become the rules

we expect in adulthood. That is why it is so common to hear people say, 'I married my mother/father.'

What's more, when we are extensively gaslit in childhood, our emotions are belittled, disregarded, minimised, devalued and invalidated, which means we don't grow an emotional library. We lose connection and trust in our own emotions, so we use other people as emotional reference cards instead. We allow others to dictate what we feel, rather than trusting ourselves to know. Building that emotional library is vital in forming a sense of self and identity. We will look at how to do this in Chapter 10.

CHAPTER 9

Is it Me? Am I the Drama?

> Jane: 'What if it's me? What if she's right? What if I'm the one causing all this? I mean, I'm the common denominator – I'm the one who has all the problems. No one else seems to care, so maybe it is me?'

'Am I the narcissist?' is a question we hear over and over again. People are paralysed with fear that it's true – that they really are the problem. And we are quick to say: 'If you are sitting in the chair opposite me, willing to look at where you have unhealthy behaviour that might impact your relationships, and how you can change it, then you are definitely not a narcissist.'

And we say that with an awareness that sometimes narcissists will enter therapy under the guise of wanting help, but all they really want is collusion and enabling. They're not looking for genuine change, they're looking for agreement.

A good therapist will be able to spot this, but sometimes they don't, especially in couples counselling. Bear in mind that, surprisingly, therapists are not trained in emotional abuse as standard practice and need to learn about it once qualified. This can leave clients vulnerable to further abuse because the therapist doesn't realise the behaviours they are being subjected to are actually abusive.

This means it is important, when choosing a therapist to help you work through any of the issues in this book, that you find one who has a deep understanding of emotional abuse.

When it comes to answering the question 'Am I the narcissist?' we have to go back to what Kohut and Kernberg said about narcissism (see Chapter 2), but particularly Kohut, when he referred to healthy narcissism.

There is a big difference between healthy and unhealthy narcissism. We all have narcissistic traits, but not all of us are narcissists or have NPD.

Healthy narcissism is what drives us to want more for ourselves, whether it's a promotion, a healthy relationship, respect and kindness or a pay rise at work, a bigger house, a nicer car, clothes and other things. What differentiates healthy narcissism from unhealthy narcissism is the cost to others.

Let's look again at the five main traits from Chapter 2, so we can break down and compare healthy and unhealthy narcissism.

Grandiosity/superiority

Rebecca: 'I got interviewed by the leading industry magazine. They made me their number-one expert in my field. I can't help thinking I've tricked them into believing that about me, and I'm not as good as they think I am. I mean, I know I know a lot, but it's a shock to be named number one.'

Rebecca was very accomplished in her field and highly respected for her work and knowledge of her subject. She was regularly asked to talk on it and was published in

industry magazines. She was seen as a leading figure and treated as such.

If Rebecca felt her knowledge was superior to that of less experienced colleagues, that would have been wholly appropriate. It doesn't mean she thought she was better than they were – simply that she recognised her knowledge and experience made her more qualified to speak on certain subjects. It didn't mean she was self-righteous, closed to the idea that someone might know something she didn't or that she couldn't learn from others – it was just an appropriate confidence that she knew what she was talking about and was an authority on a particular subject.

That's healthy superiority. Rebecca wasn't weaponising her position to dominate and control others. She wasn't exploiting them from her position of authority, shaming people who knew less than her or using her position to demand special treatment or hurt others.

In fact, Rebecca was so far from all this that she was struggling with imposter syndrome, feeling as though she'd tricked everyone into believing she was better than she was. And due to the complementary moral defence (see p. 105), if someone told her she was wrong, she would readily believe it, rather than being able to stand confidently in her knowledge.

Conversely, with unhealthy narcissism the sense of superiority is just 'there', with no foundation. In unhealthy or toxic narcissism, any opportunity is used to flex grandiosity/superiority to dominate or demand special treatment. This is true whether the trait is covert or overt – it just presents differently.

We can see that the difference here between the healthy and unhealthy is the cost to others.

Motivational empathy

Jane: 'When my heating broke down, I rang the plumber and told him I was alone with the kids and that the kids were ill. That sounds like I was guilt tripping him, doesn't it, but that's not what I meant, I just wanted him to understand how urgent it was.'

Jane was worried that she was being like her mother and using motivational empathy to get the plumber to meet her needs with urgency. What Jane was actually doing was asking her plumber to empathise with her situation in the hope that he would be more likely to help her sooner. So yes, it was empathy, and it was motivational – but it was healthy motivational empathy.

Had the plumber said no, Jane would have accepted that and called someone else. She wouldn't have told him he was a terrible, selfish person and how dare he say no to her and then smeared his name across town for not meeting her demand.

We use healthy motivational empathy all the time when we explain to someone why we need help. When we ask for accommodation because of our circumstances, when we use the phrase 'pretty please with a cherry on top' (not sure how many people actually say that, but you know what we mean!), when we embellish a request for help with an explanation for why we are asking,

we are using motivational empathy. We are asking the person concerned to have empathy for us. What we are not doing is asking them to sacrifice themselves to meet our needs or risk losing the relationship or be emotionally punished if they refuse.

There is a small but important caveat here. When we grow up with narcissistic parents, we learn that to get our needs met we have to explain why they're important, and we drift a little close to the space where we've learned that if we can pull on their heartstrings (assuming they have any), there is a higher chance that our needs will be met. When we then take that into other relationships, it could be considered unhealthy. We call it justifying – when we start explaining why our need is important – which can often silence someone's 'no'.

Justification is close to motivational empathy, but they stem from a different space when it comes to narcissists. Whereas justification might arise from a fear of rejection and is about impressing on someone the importance of your need, so that they will think it valuable enough to want to meet it, motivational empathy weaponises that person's empathy to elicit an obligation in them; it is about dominance and control.

One of the hardest parts of healing is learning not to justify or explain why our needs are important; learning not to feel wounded when someone says no to us. To the adult child of a narcissist, it can feel like rejection and confirmation that they're not lovable when someone says no to them, when, in fact, they are just saying, 'My needs are more important than yours right now. It's not that I don't love you; it's that I need to prioritise myself in this moment.'

It's tough, isn't it? But asking someone to have empathy with us doesn't have to be manipulative, just as their saying no to us doesn't have to be confirmation that they don't care about us.

Jane: 'I remember when I was about seven asking my mum to play snap with me because I knew she liked it. I remember having to summon my courage, which seems strange now I think about it. I went to her, cards in hand and said, "Mummy, can we play snap please?" in the most polite, sweet way I could. She didn't even look at me, just said, "No, of course not, I'm too busy," and flicked me away like a bug. I went to my room and cried and tried to play snap on my own. I felt disgusting, awful and worthless, just like the least wanted thing that had ever existed. It's pitiful, really. All she had to do was be kind about it, or say maybe later, but she didn't. She was so annoyed that I had the audacity to even ask her to play with me.'

When Jane's friends said no to her, she could feel seven years old again, asking her mother to play with her, and feeling the sting of rejection and abandonment when her mother dismissed and rejected her.

That was so painful and hard for Jane to experience, but the resulting trigger feelings were for her to manage. She had to process those feelings without punishing the person who said no to her. Adult Jane had to speak soothingly to child Jane and remind her that someone saying no now wasn't the same as her mum saying no to her when she was little. She also had to remember that the disappointment and rejection she felt were valid, but they were not the fault of the person who said no – we discuss this reparenting technique (a way of addressing childhood trauma) in Chapter 14.

Reparenting takes time and practice. It's about learning that when we are triggered into childhood feelings, we have to manage that for ourselves. We can't ask others to manage it for us. When someone is triggered, they can explain to whoever they are with 'I'm triggered by this; I need a moment to let the feelings pass' and ask for time or support, being careful to take responsibility for their own feelings and not ask the other person to.

The caveat here, of course, is being conscious of whether someone is knowingly triggering. In that instance, they are being deliberately toxic and unkind, and that relationship should be questioned.

The word no is one of the most important words in healthy relationships. If we only hear yes, we can't trust it, because it means someone may be prioritising us over their own needs, and that leads to resentment. We have to leave room for the no by not explaining why it is so important for the other person to meet our needs and how much they will wound us or let us down if they say no to us.

Entitlement

Jack: 'I deserve a holiday. I've been working really hard for the last six months. It's been hard on the whole family. I just feel guilty about abandoning my team; they're under a lot of pressure as it is.'

Jack had been pushing himself for a long time and needed a break. He was perfectly entitled to take a holiday and to spend his money taking himself and his family away for a rest and quality time together. By taking time off work,

he was exercising his healthy entitlement. The big thing a therapist would hopefully have pointed out to him was that he didn't need to explain why he should have a holiday. If he had the time accrued and could afford it, he was absolutely entitled to go away.

By taking a holiday, Jack was not hurting anyone. Sure, his team might have had to take up the slack for a couple of weeks, but this was nothing they weren't used to doing for anyone on the team who went on holiday. The very fact that he noticed and realised his absence might impact them showed he was empathetic and not exploiting them.

He wasn't taking money from anyone else to pay for it, and he wasn't not running up credit-card bills that he couldn't afford to pay off. He was booking his holiday at a good time for the whole team, and was not demanding that someone else sacrifice their time off so he could have his. He was hurting no one in meeting his entitlement for a holiday. And that's what healthy entitlement looks like.

Jack struggled with healthy entitlement prior to receiving therapy because he'd been taught that meeting or prioritising his own needs and healthy entitlement demonstrated how selfish, lazy, manipulative, greedy and self-centred he was. As his identity and sense of self grew with therapy, he became more and more able to meet his healthy entitlement and take what he was owed and had earned.

Unhealthy entitlement is the polar opposite to Jack's initial position. It means the narcissist taking what they want when they want it, just because they want it. It shows no care or consideration for how others might be impacted or what it might cost them.

Remember, entitlement is applicable to time, emotional labour, energy, physical labour, rest, money, reward – anything someone can take is subject to entitlement.

Exploitation

Megan: 'I know I could ask her for help – she offers it all the time – but I don't want to take the mick. I don't want to exploit her. My mother constantly demands I let her use my things, have money, clothes, a lift, whatever – it's all the bloody time. It's like she thinks she can use me to just get what she wants whenever she wants it.'

Megan was scared that asking for help from a friend would make her feel she was exploiting them, and that would make her a bad person. Her belief system, created in childhood, meant that the thought of asking her friend for help caused her to project on to them the feelings *she* felt as a child when her parent exploited *her*. Megan saw accepting help, asking for help or asking for a favour as negatively exploiting the person concerned. It was very black and white for her.

When someone grows up in a narcissistic family system, they are exposed to abusive exploitation constantly, be that with their resources, skills, talents or belongings; being met with severe punishment if they refuse or resist.

The narcissistic parent uses motivational empathy, fear, obligation and guilt (FOG) to exploit their child to get their own needs met. They will also let the child know just how much of a burden it

is, or even how wicked they are for asking for their own need to be met, or to be given something, like clothes or money. (Narcissistic partners will do it, too, but the conditioning from childhood is our focus here.)

For the purpose of this section, we want to reframe the idea that asking for help is exploiting a friend in a negative or unhealthy sense and ask you to sit with the idea that exploitation doesn't always have to be negative.

In 'healthy' exploitation you can ask for and accept a friend's help without it costing them something that they are not happily and consciously willing to pay. The major difference between healthy and unhealthy exploitation is that, in unhealthy exploitation, i.e. where a narcissist is exploiting someone, there is no space for the word 'no'.

If Megan had asked her friend, 'Hey, could you help me with something, please?' and her friend had said, 'Sorry, I haven't got time at the moment,' Megan would likely have responded with, 'Not a problem.' Then she would either have found someone else to help or perhaps asked for a recommendation. If Megan's friend had declined, they would not have been punished, stonewalled, guilt tripped and manipulated in response. The 'no' would have been accepted – although Megan would likely never have asked again, due to her hyper-independence. (It's OK, she is working on it; by the end of therapy, she will be able to ask for help and receive a no without experiencing shame!)

But if a narcissist asks for help (and it's probably a bit obvious now where this is going) and they hear the word no, they respond with punishment, stonewalling, guilt tripping, manipulation and, ultimately, smear campaigning and 'After all I've done for you!' This is straight out of the narcissist's playbook – demanding that you meet their need above your own, that you sacrifice yourself to

do so, and all with absolutely no concern for what it will cost you, only that you meet their demand.

In healthy relationships, we can ask for help, favours, time or things. It isn't exploiting that person as long as we accept their no and don't punish them or ourselves for it. We understand that when someone says no to us, it's about them meeting their own needs, not about rejecting ours.

If a friend constantly says no, then we may have to look at where the reciprocity and equality is in the relationship. Eventually, it may be that we recognise this particular friend as someone not to request help from, holding a boundary for ourselves around whether or not we ask them for help, offer them help or, finally, if we want to be in a relationship where we feel repeatedly rejected.

Impaired self-awareness

Rebecca: 'My girlfriend was making pasta pesto and I was watching her. She was making it differently from how I would and I started getting really annoyed about it, like irrationally angry. The way I was thinking about her was actually really vile. I thought she was being stupid and thick and wow, it was nasty. I was just about to snap at her about how she was making it, when I realised how ridiculous it was to be angry about this. I started thinking why I was angry and realised I was scared. It took a moment, but I realised I thought I was going to get in trouble for the way she was making it because it was different to the way my mother did it. My mother always

taught us that her way was the right way, and if we tried to do something a different way, she would get angry and mean. Christ, it never fails to amaze me how subtly she's got into my head. Imagine if I had actually snapped.'

Rebecca was describing her self-awareness. She was looking at her feelings and reactions to someone else's behaviour and asking herself why she was having them. That's self-reflection. In NPD, as explained in Chapter 2, it's not that there's no self-awareness, it's that there's impaired self-awareness.

More accurately, we could say that there is no self-reflection. When someone is healthy, or trying to heal their trauma, they look inwards instead of outwards for an explanation as to why they feel that way. That is to say, they don't blame someone else, something else or the universe for why they behaved a certain way; they look at what was happening inside for them, at what's in their history that made them behave that way.

So in Rebecca's case, she was able to self-reflect and think about what was driving her feelings, and realise that her anger and irritation were actually born out of the fear of her mother's reaction.

What is healthy self-awareness?

Healthy self-awareness is looking at our behaviour and being able to reflect on it when someone tells us we've hurt them. It is trying to stay away from defensiveness, and it is accepting responsibility where appropriate.

Appropriate being the key word. Bear in mind that toxic and narcissistic people are going to accuse victims of things they haven't done or project intention on to them that isn't genuinely there. In

these instances, it's best to avoid engaging as much as possible and to refute accusations calmly. Easier said than done, we know. This is where the 'grey rock method' comes in handy (see Chapter 11). It will help you to avoid being dragged into arguments and forced to defend yourself in the face of these projections.

Don't forget that the narcissist will use accusations to deflect attention away from their own behaviour. In that situation, to hold the conversation on topic, you can say something like, 'We can talk about that in a moment. Right now, we are talking about this.'

Healthy self-awareness is also about learning from ourselves. One way of recognising where we might owe someone an apology is by looking at a situation and asking if there was anything we would have done differently. If there is, that's where we probably need to take responsibility and apologise.

On that note, let's talk about what a healthy authentic apology looks like. Healthy apologies are about owning the behaviour, not explaining it. When someone says, 'I'm sorry but . . .' they're saying, 'I'm not sorry. I have an excuse, an explanation and a reason why it was OK for me to behave the way I did.'

A healthy apology also doesn't include the phrase 'I'm sorry you feel that way'. That statement blames the recipient for their feelings, and fails to take ownership for causing them. It's a complete fallacy that other people don't have control or power over our feelings. If that was true, then someone doing something nice for us wouldn't make us feel happy and loved. (There is, of course, a boundary where we have to be responsible for our own feelings, but it's also important to recognise that some people deliberately engender feelings within us, such as fear obligation and guilt.)

There are four steps to an authentic apology:

1. The apology itself – saying sorry

2. Taking responsibility – I did that thing and it was unkind/thoughtless/etc. of me
3. Offering atonement – is there anything I can do to make it better?
4. Changed behaviour – not doing the same thing again, or making a concerted effort to change

An apology without changed behaviour is just manipulation. It's appeasement. It's not about taking responsibility, but simply silencing the wounded party until the next time.

Very often, the narcissist will make it seem they are more hurt than you are because they are hurting about having hurt you. They will make themselves the victim: 'I'm the worst person ever.' 'You should just leave me.' 'I can't do anything right!' 'I just won't say anything at all, then!' This uses motivational empathy manipulatively to avoid responsibility and forces the person who is holding the narcissist accountable into feeling sorry for them – so sorry that they end up reassuring the narcissist, being sidetracked from the original issue.

So self-awareness is partly about recognising our behaviour and being able to reflect on how it might impact someone else, or even ourselves. But there are different types of self-awareness, and they all contribute to how someone interacts with others and themselves.

Awareness of triggers

Jack: I hate it when she nags me about taking the bins out. It's so annoying – it's like she's assuming I will forget, but I won't! I never have! Every time she reminds me, I feel about eight years old again when my dad

would tell me how useless I was if I forgot something for school. I always felt so small and pathetic.

Jack is referring to a trigger: when his wife reminds him to take the bins out, he remembers how it felt to disappoint his father, and how his father's reaction made him feel. Instead of being able to see it as his wife trying to help him, he feels it as criticism – confirmation that he's useless, just as his dad told him whenever he forgot something.

Triggered. It's a word that has come to be bandied around casually, but a trigger is intense – an intense emotional flashback, whereby we experience feelings we felt in an initial traumatic event.

Understanding and being aware of things that can trigger a person is incredibly important – because when it happens, they are operating in survival mode. They're not using their rational brain to process and analyse a situation. They're bringing into the present moment an experience from the past and perhaps also projecting intention on to the other person concerned.

Awareness of relational patterns

We've explained many times about how the relational patterns we learn from our family of origin are the ones we take into our adult relationships. In understanding those different patterns, what they looked like, and what our 'normal' is, we can start changing them. Changing our relational patterns and learning new ones starts with undoing the original ones through an awareness of them. Because if we don't know what we're starting with, we don't know what we're changing.

Awareness of beliefs and values

We will address this in depth in Chapter 10, but understanding our beliefs and values – both those we've been conditioned to and those we feel are our own – is core to building a healthy sense of identity and self, which, in turn, builds our boundaries, self-worth, self-esteem and so on.

Basically, all our healing is down to bringing into our awareness, as much as possible, the parts that make us operate the way we do. When we do that, we can start healing and challenging and changing. This then leads to a future of healthy relationships, with ourselves and with others.

We can see now that the traits we've discussed can be expressed healthily, and that this can be measured in terms of the cost to others. Understanding this means we can start to allow ourselves the freedom to ask for our needs to be met, to feel confident in our skills and knowledge and to realise that having those healthy traits doesn't make us the same as a narcissist.

CHAPTER 10

Who Am I?

> Megan: 'I feel like a shell. I have no idea who I am. I don't think I could even tell you what my favourite colour is. I just seem to blend into what other people want me to be, like a chameleon.'

After years of being told by the narcissistic parent who and what they are, conditioned through shame, mocking or motivational empathy into what their parent wanted them to be, the adult child has no sense of identity. They can't separate themselves from the projected image they were given and, as a result, they have no idea where they end and others begin.

When we ask the child of a narcissist to tell us who they are, or even just to tell us a bit about themselves, more often than not we are met with the gaze of a rabbit caught in headlights, frozen with confusion. Typically, they will have no idea how to answer, but it is something they can work on. We are not 'fixed' beings. We are ever changing, ever learning, ever evolving.

Finding out who you are is a lifelong experience, whether you are brought up by a narcissistic parent or not. Every person in the world is continually rethinking, reframing and unlearning unhealthy, damaging, conditioned thought patterns and behaviours and relearning new, healthy ones. However, for the adult child of a narcissistic parent, this is a more challenging undertaking than it is for the adult child of a good-enough parent.

Finding our inner voice

Out with friends, Jane ordered what they were having because she was scared she would choose the 'wrong' thing. Paralysed by choice and unable to explain her fear, she trusted that everyone else was more qualified to make an informed choice than she was.

If Jane ordered a meal that she didn't like, she would berate and chastise herself for making a 'bad' decision, but if her friend did the same, she would urge them to send it back and get something different. She would even find value in taking matters into her own hands and rescuing her friend from the terrible meal, secretly glad she hadn't made the mistake herself.

Each time Jane blended and merged with her friends' wants and needs, she was taking another step away from finding out who she was and what she liked.

Jane was brought up in a narcissistic home where things were viewed as good or bad, right or wrong. In order to stay safe, she had to fall in with these values and views. This meant she had absolutely no idea what her own values were or what she actually believed in as an adult.

Jane really struggled with this, and with the feeling she could 'miss out' if she made the 'wrong' choice. Her childhood narrative kept showing up and telling her that if she made a mistake, was less than perfect, complained, was dissatisfied, bad or wrong, she would be punished and rejected.

The mere thought of making a mistake sent Jane into shame, which then spiralled into a negative thought cycle

confirming she was a terrible person – useless, hopeless, unlovable, unwanted and just taking up space. She catastrophised – imagining worst-case scenarios. She could not think straight.

Jane's inner child was being triggered, her past blurring with her present. Back in the restaurant, she was no longer a thirty-seven-year-old sitting at the table with her friends; she was a powerless seven-year-old, terrified of making a mistake and experiencing the shame and humiliation her abusers heaped on her if she did, reminding her that she was an unlovable inconvenience.

In the moment of fear about making the wrong choice, Jane had an opportunity to show her inner child the compassion and empathy she was so grossly denied years before. This kind of self-talk or self-kindness to our inner child, or younger self, is called reparenting or inner-child work, where we become the parent we needed and show our inner child the love and affection they deserved. We will cover this in more detail in Chapter 14.

Some people find reparenting really difficult to connect with or tolerate because they sit in a place of anger with their inner child. They collude with the shaming and berating of that younger self because they blame them for getting it wrong, for not being good enough. But that self was just a child, and it wasn't their fault that they weren't meeting the unrealistic expectations of abusive adults. It was the abusive adults who were at fault.

When we avoid feeling shame by using one of the coping mechanisms described in Chapter 5, we are acting from our child self's space. We need to identify the narratives that taught

us to hide the parts of ourselves we were told were shameful and start showing them the light. Inner-child work is talking to our younger selves, showing them compassion and kindness and rewriting their personal narratives to replace those that were dictated to them.

But how on earth do we do that? Below are some exercises designed to help connect with our true selves and start identifying the beliefs we were taught – about ourselves, about others and about the world. Because once we know what these beliefs are, we can either leave them or keep them. The choice is ours.

Finding our edges

As a rule, we can very clearly see the edge of one person's home and the next. There will be walls, maybe a garden with a fence or hedge that separates the two. We can see where one person's space ends and the next person's begins.

The narcissistic parent will rarely encourage appropriate independence and will actively punish, ignore or discard their child when they attempt to live a separate life from them.

> When one of Jane's friends was having a crisis, Jane felt as though she was having one, too. She felt all her friend's feelings and could not separate out her own. She couldn't find her edges and got lost in her friend's emotion. Jane's empathy was tied to others' because that kept her safe when she was young. It gave her a superpower. She could use it to predict how her mother felt and then act accordingly to reduce the risk that she would abandon her.

So Jane had to learn to build walls around her empathy and protect both herself and her relationships from this overconnection. By feeling her friends' feelings she was potentially making their situation about herself, and possibly assuming and projecting feelings on to them.

By actively recognising and challenging her feelings, Jane learned to boundary them. For example, if her friend was sharing an upsetting story and Jane noticed her emotions rising, she could allow them, but also contain them. Instead of saying, 'That must feel X,' she learned to say, 'How does that make you feel?'

Jane learned that by asking, rather than assuming, she could protect her friendships and allow her friends their autonomy and experience, while still being supportive. It's tricky but important in terms of relating to others, as they, especially healthy people, can feel overwhelmed and smothered in a relationship with someone like Jane because they're being told what they feel rather than asked.

Learning to allow someone else to have their own feelings and experience is to no longer fix or rescue them. They have their own history, their own lived experience, they will have their own conditioned responses and values. We are wired for connection – we are all connected but we are all different.

Allowing other people their edges means that ours become more defined; we are able to allow others their separateness alongside our own without it feeling like rejection or criticism. This, in turn, enables us to have healthy relationships, where we don't feel responsible for how someone else feels or behaves – the antithesis of hyper-dependency.

Exercise: Who do you admire?

Knowing yourself involves knowing your likes, dislikes, preferences, values and beliefs. Sometimes it can be hard to connect with that internally, so let's take it externally and look at who you admire.

It can be anyone but, ideally, someone you know – because when it's someone famous, there is a danger of projecting on to them a series of characteristics, values and beliefs that are not based in real knowing. Having said that, if the projection is a positive one that comes from a place of admiration, the person can still be used.

When you have your person, use the space below to describe them and what you admire about them.

_____

_____

Notice the things that you admire, and ask, 'Do I want to be like that?'

By identifying the parts of them that you wish to have, too, you start identifying your values. And if you identify your values, bingo! You've got edges!

Exercise: Who did they say you were?

The image projected on to the child of a narcissist, whatever their family role, envelops them like a cloak, weighing them down, clouding their vision and disabling their ability to see their true form.

This exercise identifies the projected image and attempts to expose the real form. Answers should be as descriptive as possible. Or not. We're not the boss of anyone.

- How would you describe yourself?
- If you have a partner, how would they describe you?
- How would your close friends describe you?
- How would your work colleagues and extended circle of friends (not close friends) describe you?
- How would your family describe you?

Reflections:

- How easy was it to describe yourself?
- How easy was it to know how others would describe you?
- How true do the descriptions by others feel?
- Notice how much easier it is to name and believe the negative over the positive things people say about you.
- What are the differences between how your family and how your friends would describe you?

Note: As we have explained many times now, our relational patterns mean that we repeat the same relationships over and over. It could well be, therefore, that the people around you are toxic because they benefit from you not having boundaries. So when answering the questions above, it is important to keep this in mind. If there is a strong similarity between what your abusive family and your close circle think of you, it is more likely that you have multiple toxic people around you than that you really are the things you think they say about you.

Exercise: Understanding the family rules

Every family has a set of rules. In a healthy family system, these boundaries will be held with compassion and kindness, and a child's autonomy and voice will be respected. Should someone break the rules, that will be discussed and corrected with empathy and understanding.

In a toxic family, if a child breaks the rules, they will be at risk of shame, humiliation, punishment and exile. The rules might be explicit or implicit. It's important to try to think of the rules that you live your life by. Where do they come from? What makes you a good person or a bad person? Whose rules are they?

In the spaces below, write down five of your family's rules. They might be things like, 'No one says no to Mum' or, 'Everyone has to be academic; music isn't a real job' or, 'Lying on the sofa on your day off is lazy' or, 'You have to do what Dad wants when he wants it' or, 'Don't moan or complain'.

1. ----------
2. ----------
3. ----------
4. ----------
5. ----------

Once you have identified the rules, ask yourself what you think of them. Consider these questions:

- How helpful were they?
- Who did they serve?

- What did they make you feel?
- What happened if you broke them?
- What was their purpose?
- Who did they protect?
- Did they deserve the protection?

This exercise can be repeated as many times as necessary to uncover all the family rules and narratives.

Exercise: Shoulds vs wants

Someone in childhood taught you it was best to ignore your wants, You also learned that your value to others was tied up in how you helped them. That belief was then taken into every relationship – in adulthood and in childhood – so that you now find value in being helpful to others.

In everything you do for everyone else, there will be a gain to you that soothes a wound from childhood. That means you are at risk of putting other people's needs, demands and requests above your own, sacrificing yourself to get the reward from helping them. The problem is that you then spread yourself too thin, saying yes when you mean no, ignoring what you *want* to do, and instead doing what you think you should do, prioritising the 'shoulds' to protect your peace and safety.

When looking at shoulds and wants, it's important to understand that, by tying your value to the former, you betray and hurt yourself – and it's in that space that resentment builds towards another.

Knowing the difference between when you are doing something because you should do it versus when you want to do it is one of the most important aspects of finding yourself and building your edges.

Think about the last time someone asked you to do something for them. Did you want to do it? Or did you agree to it because you thought you should – because not doing it would risk them rejecting you?

You might identify the 'should' via a sinking feeling, a dent in the gut, say, or a little pull. Notice this and allow it to grow, sitting with the discomfort. Notice how saying yes when you mean no makes you feel, both physically and emotionally. Really tune into the feelings, and then in future you'll recognise them. You'll think, Oh! This means I don't want to . . . And you'll be able to make a more informed choice.

We are not saying it's always bad to do things because you 'should'. Sometimes the cost to self is a price worth paying. But it's about understanding why you are prioritising the should over the want and recognising that you are making an active choice in doing so.

One of the most disempowering phrases is 'I don't have a choice'. *There is always choice.* But often we choose based on avoiding conflict, punishment, shame and exile. And while all this is absolutely valid, the point is that we need to take responsibility for it. It doesn't mean we are bad people if we make a choice that keeps the peace – our power is in owning that we are making that choice, and that we are doing so with awareness.

In toxic relationships, when we automatically do things because we are told we should, we are ignoring our authentic need. We feel

obliged to meet someone else's need before our own for fear of losing the relationship. Remember, though, if a relationship cannot withstand someone saying 'no' to a request, it isn't healthy: it is dependent on silence and compliance.

Turning inwards

Turning inwards is simply questioning ourselves to work out what we really want, as opposed to what we feel we should do.

On a night out, Rebecca was often unable to choose what to wear without her friends' approval. Her fear of being criticised and judged overrode any thoughts of wearing what she wanted to. To Rebecca, this was a foreign concept.

We suggested that Rebecca *turn inwards* and ask herself:

- What colours do I like?
- What types of clothing are comfortable or uncomfortable for me?
- What textures do I like or dislike?
- What mood am I in?
- How do I feel?
- What do I want to express about myself to others?

Turning inwards is something we encourage our clients to practise daily. It can be tempting to focus on big things first, but try to resist this and instead start small. It can be as small as deciding what *you* want for breakfast, rather than asking others what they want first. It is through this focus on yourself and on small, seemingly trivial desires that you learn to trust yourself.

Jack found making decisions overwhelming. He felt the need to run them past people he admired, but then this made him feel inferior because he trusted their decision-making skills more than his own.

While it can be helpful to seek advice when we have big decisions to make, if we do not trust ourselves to make even the smallest decisions, how do we build the confidence to trust ourselves to make bigger, more important ones?

Building a habit of thinking about your own needs and wants takes time and requires a shift in focus, away from prioritising those of others. Consider how much thought you put into what a friend/sister/partner/child might want for their birthday or Christmas present. You will probably think about what brings them joy, what they enjoy doing, what makes them laugh, smile or feel comforted. To the child of a narcissist, putting this level of thought into what *they* want for themselves tends to feel alien because it seems to them self-centred and over-indulgent. It also feels threatening because they never want to behave like their narcissistic parent. However, to build their identity and find their edges it is essential they ask themselves questions and take time to get to know themselves.

It absolutely isn't narcissistic to meet your own needs and consider yourself when making decisions. And anyone who claims it *is* is probably benefiting from your external focus – because, of course, if you ignore your own desires, you are more likely to meet theirs.

Exercise: Noticing your likes and dislikes

Below are some questions for practising turning inwards:

- Would you prefer a comedy gig or music festival?

- Would you prefer to cook or be cooked for?
- Do you prefer to drive or be the passenger?
- Do you prefer city breaks or beach holidays?
- What is your favourite season and why?
- Name two things that made you laugh recently. What about them was funny to you?
- Name a time when you felt anger over an injustice you witnessed and why?
- Do you prefer scary movies or romantic comedies?
- Do you prefer documentaries or sci-fi?
- What music do you like to listen to when driving, relaxing or dancing?
- Do you prefer a bath or shower?
- What is your ideal night in?
- Do you prefer walking or biking?
- What is your favourite restaurant and why?
- Who do you feel most 'you' with and why?
- How are you different in that person's company?
- What prevents you from being that way in the company of others?
- Which version of you do you like best?

Creating pause

Creating pause is giving yourself a moment to listen to physical and emotional reactions before actually responding. It is a helpful technique for those who find it hard to recognise their genuine response in the moment. Initially, when you start to turn inwards and listen to your own needs, you might find yourself

in an echo chamber, repeating the thoughts and feelings you think you *should* have. If you can't identify an authentic thought, notice any physical responses to your situation, like a tug in your tummy or just discomfort or an unexplained feeling of resistance.

If someone asks you to do something and you do experience a physical response, a useful phrase to give yourself more time to turn inwards and work out what's behind those feelings is, 'I need to think about that. Leave it with me, I'll get back to you.' This is creating pause.

> When asked to make cakes for a school bake sale, Jane agreed automatically. She ignored the little tug telling her to say no because she didn't have time, and regretted it later. By creating pause and saying, 'Let me think about that and get back to you,' Jane could have given herself time to reflect on whether she did actually want to bake cakes or not.

Pausing before reacting creates a space to make an informed choice rather than an emotional one. So next time someone asks you to go somewhere or help out, try pausing instead – take a moment to look inwards and ask yourself: 'Is this something I would actually *like* to do?'

The biggest challenge in creating pause is catching the moment you need to do it, before it passes. Sometimes it helps to have a rule in your head to take two breaths before responding to a question. If possible, it might even be worth removing yourself (going to the loo just to wash your hands and connect

with yourself and your feelings, for example) and ask yourself: 'Do I have the capacity to follow through with the decision I'm making?'

Think back to a time when you said a knee-jerk yes instead of no and consider the physical and emotional responses you had in the moment. Register them, so the next time it happens you'll know what they're trying to tell you.

One of the biggest takeaways here is this: even if you do say yes when you mean no, you're allowed to change your mind. You can contact the person in question, apologise and explain that you can't meet the commitment you agreed to. That, in turn, will help you to feel braver about saying no. Because, after all, it's the fear of your own no that keeps you saying yes.

It takes time to trust and strengthen your internal voice. But it is like a muscle: the more you check in with and listen to it, the louder it gets, until it becomes second nature. Then, when you find yourself presented with a situation that does not align with your wants and needs, alarm bells will ring so loudly you won't be able to ignore them.

The physical side of our responses

Finding our edges entails moving out of survival mode and reconnecting to who we truly are. When the survival responses we identified in Chapter 5 have become ingrained habits, it takes time to consciously unlearn them and move out of survival mode. One way to do this is by regulating our nervous systems and checking in with how we are feeling, becoming aware of the physical sensations in different parts of our bodies.

Exercise: Body scan

Note: Body work, like the scan below, may be very triggering and retraumatising if you have embodied trauma from physical or sexual assault. Please do not attempt to do this exercise if the idea makes you uncomfortable. Being unable to do it doesn't make you 'bad' at therapy or self-care; it's just one technique that doesn't work for you, and may even harm you – and that is totally valid.

Find a comfortable place to lie or sit; if it feels comfortable to do so, close your eyes.

Take a deep breath to fill your lungs, noticing your chest rise, and breathe out slowly, until you feel your chest fall (decompress).

Notice how your body feels right now, starting at the top of your head, neck and shoulders, moving on to your arms, hands, back and hips, then down to your buttocks, legs, feet and into your toes, taking twenty or thirty seconds on each area, asking yourself the following questions:

- Do you notice any feelings, sensations or general discomfort?
- Does any area feel relaxed or tense?
- Do you notice any area feeling comfortable or uncomfortable?
- Is any part tired or lethargic/energetic or rested?

This is an exercise you can repeat regularly, so you grow the connection with your body and increase your awareness of your feelings and sensations, meaning you'll be

more in tune with it. This, in turn, means you'll be able to respond more honestly and authentically in the moment. The purpose is not to change or berate your body, but connect to it and how it feels in the moment, right now, without shame or judgement.

Allowing feelings and emotions

Rebecca: 'I remember the time I drove down to pick him up. It was two hours there and two hours back. All the way back, he was telling me what a useless driver I was, how crap I am generally, calling me awful names. My favourite one was when he called me a "useless c**t"! I mean, the audacity of the man; he can't even bloody drive, haha. It's hilarious, really – I mean, I'm actually a good driver.'

Rebecca recounted what she experienced in an abusive relationship with disconnection and used humour as deflection. She told the story honestly, but with little to no emotion. It was as though she was talking about someone else.

As a child, Rebecca learned to swallow her emotions, ignore them, suck them up, put on a brave face, smile and pretend everything was all right when it wasn't. She was taught never to moan or complain.

Feeling their own feelings is very difficult for the child of a narcissistic parent because they learned that their emotions were dangerous and threatened their safety, both physically and emotionally.

Many adult children of narcissistic parents try to rationalise or intellectualise their feelings.

> Jane: 'I shouldn't be feeling this way/others have it worse/I should be so grateful for all I have in my life . . .'
>
> When Jane was having a hard time, she would immediately invalidate and self-gaslight her own feelings.

Instead of self-gaslighting, we have to let our emotions come to the surface. We have to feel them, name them, treat ourselves with compassion in the midst of them and allow them to pass through us.

The child of a narcissist will have to teach themselves how to do this. This can be extremely frustrating for them, and they may feel angry at the thought of having to learn new skills. And this is valid. However, it is essential for healing.

Feeling your emotions may involve taking time alone or with the aid of a therapist and, either way, committing to checking in with yourself. Initially, it may feel as though there aren't any feelings, but numb is still a feeling. Then, when you do first connect with them, it may feel a bit like a faulty tap, as being able to cut them off may be virtually impossible.

When describing some of our clients' experiences, we often say it is as though they are trying to hold back a dam of emotion. Cracks start appearing, until they are washed away by the flood as it finally breaks. This can be scary, but it's transformative in connecting with and processing emotion. That being said, do take it very slowly and make sure you're in a safe space to experience the emotion.

When Jane started committing to the exercise below ('Feeling your feelings'), no emotions surfaced. However, over time, she began to feel an array of emotions when she least expected them. Her familiar response to uncomfortable feelings was to keep busy, meet friends, shop, drink, clean – anything that would distract her and numb the pain.

Creating time alone, walking, journaling, painting, meditating, washing the dishes, lying on the sofa can all make space for feelings to surface. It doesn't matter where you take the time. There is no right or wrong time to do it, as long as the time is afforded. To begin with, it will take a conscious effort to check in with yourself regularly throughout the day, but eventually it will come naturally.

Exercise: Feeling your feelings

Sitting with difficult emotions can be extremely uncomfortable, but it is not dangerous. For the purposes of this exercise, rate the intensity of the feeling from 0 to 10 (0 being absent and 10 being the worst possible).

Sit with the feeling and ask yourself these questions:

- Where do you feel it in your body?
- Is it a heavy or light feeling?
- If it had a colour, would it be light or dark?
- Does it have a shape or is it shapeless?
- If it had a texture, would it be smooth or rough?
- If you touched it, would you like the feeling?

- Is it warm, hot, cold, freezing or tepid?
- How dense is it?
- Does it change size?
- Does it change shape?
- Does it move around your body?
- If you could take it out of yourself and put it on a chair next to you, what would it say to you?

Once you have answered these questions, rate the feeling again. Has it moved? Which way on the scale? What, if anything, could you do to make it move down the scale a point, half a point, even.

Using this scaling exercise is really helpful in enabling us to notice when our feelings are getting overwhelming before that happens. It teaches us to listen to the whispers and attune to ourselves, so we can be proactive in our self-protection. It's particularly helpful when managing anxiety.

Children of narcissistic parents are often unable to name their emotions, simply because they weren't allowed to feel them or taught to identify them. With clients, we might start by just saying 'nice' or 'nasty' in reference to the feeling they're experiencing. From there, we build their emotional library and give them the language to describe their emotional experience.

We are very careful not to call them 'good' or 'bad' feelings, because there is no such thing as a 'bad' emotion – all emotions just are, and they exist to show us what is safe, healthy and trustworthy for ourselves.

You can use the table opposite to help you name your feelings.

Feelings Table

Fear	Anger	Happy	Disgust	Shame	Sad
Terrified	Hurt	Optimistic	Disapproval	Unlovable	Depressed
Anxious	Frustrated	Joyful	Awful	Worthless	Lonely
Scared	Vengeful	Proud	Repugnant	Pathetic	Abandoned
Humiliated	Critical	Playful	Disappointed	Less than	Despair
Rejected	Jealous	Creative	Repulsion	Useless	Guilty
Inferior	Furious	Ecstatic	Revulsion	Not good enough	Powerless
Inadequate	Rage	Accepted	Judgemental	Immoral	Apathetic
Worried	Threatened	Amused	Hesitant	Evil	Victimised
Disrespected	Resentful	Hopeful	Detestable	Fundamentally flawed	Ignored
Helpless	Aggressive	Excited	Loathing	Repulsive	Invisible
Submissive	Irritated	Empowered	Aversion	Stupid	Indifferent
Insecure	Distant	Peaceful	Avoidance	Self-loathing	Bored

Whatever feeling is there, it needs to be felt to be released. Finding out what works for you and helps you to process your feelings is part of getting to know yourself and discovering who you are. Some prefer long walks or a hike in the woods; others choose to work with a therapist, read books, join a self-help group, journal, sit back on their porch. All that matters is that you create space and time for processing your feelings. It may seem self-indulgent – because the child of the narcissistic parent has been taught it is shameful to focus on themselves or meet their own needs – but this is the narrative we want to shift. To know yourself it is essential to know your emotions.

Connecting with the grief

Sometimes the pain of the grief can be overwhelming and incredibly uncomfortable. Threatening, even. Sit with the discomfort. Take a breath. What are you trying to avoid or flee from? Follow the fear. What is hiding underneath it?

> Jane: 'I wanted to continue to believe the best in people, that they really didn't mean it and they were just misunderstood. When the illusion began to shatter and I saw my childhood for what it was, I was so scared that the grief enveloped me and I felt like I was drowning in sadness.

The fear is valid, and it may be consuming. However, try not to deny or minimise it or talk yourself out of it. Understand and work through any pain. Connecting with the grief and loss is a key part of the healing process. (We will look at this in depth in Chapter 15.)

Speaking out – shifting the shame

It can be very healing to share your story, pain and emotions with others. This helps to process them and makes you feel less alone. It shifts your shame. But it is important to only share these things with safe people.

When someone from a narcissistic family system starts seeing the toxicity for what it is, they want to speak up and out against it. The anger they unleash wants to be validated, as it should

be. However, because of those pesky relational patterns, the people around them (friends, siblings, extended family, etc.) likely have had similar experiences, and if they're still sitting in the dark denying what has happened (and still is), they're going to shield their eyes and demand that the light is turned off when someone tries to switch it on for them. They will deny the truth-speaker's experiences, which will further traumatise and gaslight them, generating more wounds that need healing.

So when it comes to sharing your truth, you need to seek spaces where people are no longer in denial and will validate without shame or gaslighting. Such spaces might include Facebook groups, online forums, therapy or close, safe friends. Ultimately, what we are saying is that confidence in your truth solidifies through sharing it – but be very careful who you hand it to. Only share it with someone who wears kid gloves. It is vulnerable and could be destroyed by a rough handler.

When you do find safe, loving, validating spaces to share your experiences, you are able to put down the shame that was handed to you. You can say, 'This was a gift given to me that has been poisoning me all these years, and I no longer want it.'

Speaking out in this way about your experience brings you out of hiding and peels off your armour. Because it's in the speaking out that shame is rendered powerless and placed back firmly where it belongs – with the abuser.

Telling our stories is part of building our identities and allowing them to exist. By sharing stories, we bring shame into the light, which is where it dies. This allows us to integrate our stories into our selves and own them without shame or self-judgement.

Values

Values are the basic and fundamental beliefs that motivate us. They guide our decisions and drive our behaviour. They determine what is important to us. Values influence how we treat others and interact with the world – they are a part of what makes us us.

Shattering the unhealthy values the narcissistic parent instils is imperative in healing. But it also begs the question: if I don't value the same thing as my narcissistic parent, then what do I value?

> Having been raised in a narcissistic family system, Megan valued direct communication and hated falseness and indirect passive-aggressive communication. Megan wanted people to be honest and direct with her and always wanted to know if she had done something that hurt someone in her life. But while she was requesting that others be honest with her, she was not holding herself to the same value. Megan could complain in a restaurant or advocate for herself at work, but when she felt devalued by someone, she still believed she should deal with this by herself and didn't share it with the person in question. Not showing up fully in her relationships, Megan was still acting from a place of fear and rejection and was therefore hiding her true self.

Valuing honesty means that we not only have to be honest with ourselves but also the others in our lives. It is uncomfortable, but if we are unable to share how we feel in relationships because of fear of stonewalling, aggression, silent treatment or blame, we have to ask ourselves certain questions:

- Is this a healthy relationship?
- Is this a relationship I can be myself in?
- Is this a relationship I can grow in?

Answering these questions is hard; but being in a relationship where you are emotionally abandoned and punished for being yourself is even harder.

Exercise: Evaluating relationships

Below is a list of questions to ask yourself in terms of relationships. Notice your physical responses to these, as well as your emotional ones.

- Who do you feel most at ease with?
- Who do you feel safest with?
- What is different about you when you are with that person you feel safe with?
- What do they do differently that allows you to express your true self?
- What kind of friends are you attracted to?
- What qualities would you like your friends to have?
- What are the most important things you look for in a romantic relationship?
- Who is your ideal partner and what are their characteristics?
- What values would you like your partner to live by and uphold?
- What is the most attractive thing for you in a partner?

Exercise: Identifying your values

Below is a list of words for you to explore. Which are you drawn or pulled to? Which do you reject or feel ambivalent towards? There are no right or wrong answers.

- **Acceptance** Being open to oneself, others, life, etc.
- **Accountability** The willingness to accept responsibility for one's actions
- **Achievement** Something done successfully with effort, skill or courage
- **Adventurous** Disposed to seek adventure to cope with the new and unknown
- **Altruism** Selfless concern for the wellbeing of others
- **Assertiveness** Respectfully standing up for one's rights and requesting what one wants
- **Authenticity** Being genuine, real; being true to oneself
- **Beauty** To appreciate, create, nurture or cultivate beauty in oneself, others, the environment
- **Caring** To be caring towards myself, others, the environment, etc.
- **Challenge** To keep challenging oneself to grow, learn, improve
- **Compassion** Acting with kindness towards those who are suffering
- **Conformity** Being respectful of and obeying rules and obligations

- **Connection** Engaging fully in whatever one is doing, and being fully present with others
- **Contribution** Help, assistance or making a positive difference (to oneself or others)
- **Cooperation** Being collaborative with others
- **Courage / Bravery**; persisting in the face of fear, threat or difficulty
- **Creativity** To be creative or innovative
- **Curiosity** Being open-minded and interested; exploring and discovering
- **Direct communication** Sharing what one thinks or feels with clarity and without inference or passive aggression
- **Encouragement** To encourage and reward behaviour that I value in myself or others
- **Equality** Where others are treated as equal to oneself and vice versa
- **Fairness** Being fair to oneself and others
- **Freedom** The power or right to act, speak or think as one wants
- **Honesty** Being truthful and sincere (with oneself and others)
- **Integrity** The quality of being honest and having strong moral principles
- **Justice** Upholding justice and fairness
- **Love** Acting affectionately towards oneself and others
- **Open-mindedness** Thinking things through, seeing things from others' points of view and weighing evidence fairly

- **Patience** The capacity to accept or tolerate delay, problems or suffering without becoming annoyed or anxious
- **Playfulness** The quality of being light-hearted or full of fun
- **Power** The ability or capacity to direct or influence the behaviour of others or the course of events – for example, leading, organising, taking charge
- **Self-development** To keep growing; the process of learning new things and building new skills, character or life experiences
- **Sensuality** The enjoyment, expression or pursuit of physical, especially sexual, pleasure
- **Spirituality** Connecting with things bigger than oneself

Next, grab a notebook and pen, and create four columns:

1. Integral to me as a person
2. Important, but not as important as column one
3. Not important at all/completely reject them
4. I should be more like this

Working your way through the values, place each of them in one of the columns above. The key thing to notice is how closely you are aligned to the values you place most importance on.

So, for example, if adventure is one of your column-one values, when was the last time you went on one? What did it look like? How did it make you feel? How often are you attending to your need for adventure? It doesn't matter if it's been ages since you had one; the

point is to know now that it's a part of what makes you you and, moving forwards, you can ensure that you look for ways to meet that need, whether that's with a tiny adventure on a bus to another town or a trip around the world.

In terms of undoing expectations and narratives the 'should' column is intensely revealing. As you read through the list, notice the pull of 'Well, I should be more X.' Ask yourself who told you that? Who said you should be that thing? Why? How did it benefit them?

Rebecca: 'I used to think I should be more patient, and I hated that wasn't. I used to think I was horribly impatient, reckless, even, with my impatience. But I wasn't. Not really. That was just what my mother told me. I realised that what she called impatience was her blaming me for getting frustrated that she wouldn't meet my needs. If I asked her for a drink, she would tell me to wait, and if I asked again, she would yell at me and call me demanding and impatient. But I wasn't! Of course, there are times when I can be, but I don't hurt anyone with that. I'm just quick to get stuff done, and frustrated when people delay. But when it comes to kids, dogs, people who need a bit of extra time, I have spades of patience. It just wasn't true. She blamed me for her not meeting my need and showing her she wasn't perfect. I'm so f*cking angry that I carried that shame for so many years, there was no need!'

When we honour our own values, we are living for ourselves and what we believe in. We are standing in our own autonomy unapologetically. Stating that we value family, but at the same time working an eighty-hour week, will lead to internal conflict and stress, so aligning our values *and* implementing them is important.

The more we are moving and working from our values, the more we are listening to and cultivating our authentic voice. And the stronger this becomes, the more connected we are to ourselves, and our inner knowing becomes our guiding force.

CHAPTER 11

The Grey Rock Method

> Jack: 'I learned just not to tell him stuff. The same with her. Information is currency to them. They're not asking because they're interested – they're asking so they can brag to their friends that their son rubs shoulders with the rich and famous. I lied to them and told them I had signed an NDA. It's worked; they get nothing from me now.'

Unfortunately, sometimes we have no choice but to interact with narcissists. Whether it's as a co-parent, at work, in a friendship group or even court-ordered grandparent time, there are times when no contact isn't an option. Someone who has a narcissistic boss but had healthy parents would be able to recognise their behaviour as unhealthy, not take responsibility for it and take necessary steps to protect themselves. People who have a healthy sense of self aren't impacted as negatively by narcissists they come across 'in the wild' – they let it go over them, hold boundaries and carry on regardless in a way that the child of a narcissist cannot.

One of the hardest things to accept is that a narcissist isn't going to reason with anyone. They're not going to consider and self-reflect. They're not going to do anything for anyone else, unless it benefits them somehow, either now or in the future. No amount of explaining or bargaining will get the narcissist to prioritise anyone

else's needs over their own, and they will use every conversation to their own advantage – and to disadvantage others.

This is where the 'grey rock method' comes in – for us to try to protect ourselves and keep safe.

The grey rock method was developed in 2012 by an American mental-health blogger called Skylar who realised that the best way to get her ex-partner – someone she identified as a narcissist/psychopath – to leave her alone was to be as boring as possible. To deny him the drama and attention he craved.

The grey rock concept has since evolved to mean very boundaried communication that doesn't give the narcissist emotional supply or information they can weaponise. Narcissists are like emotion vampires, using others' emotions to feed their own emotional needs – to give them 'supply'. But with the grey rock method, we ignore their attempts to get us to engage from an emotional space by removing emotions from our communication. In other words, we cut off the lifeblood that feeds the narcissistic traits. No justification is given and no explanation – just brief statements of fact. For example, when Jane's mother asks her to take her to the shops, she replies 'I can't today,' without apology or explanation.

The mistake most people make with grey rock is that they think it means being short and snarky. It isn't. When someone is using grey rock, they're keeping it light and breezy, friendly, even – but ultimately, boring. They answer as briefly as possible, and, if appropriate, turn the conversation back on to the narcissist as soon as possible – say, by asking them about their day or how things are going for them.

The number-one question we get about grey rock is: 'Doesn't that make me as bad as them? Aren't I stonewalling them?'

The answer is no. Using grey rock is an indication that the relationship has broken down so much or is so threatening that

someone has to protect themselves in it. It is typically a precursor to going no contact (if that's an option) and a sign that the person has been suffering for a very long time and a huge amount of pain has been endured. And if the other person was reasonable or working towards resolution, grey rock wouldn't be needed.

The grey rock method is used for protection, safety and self-preservation and, to an extent, it is playing the narcissist at their own game – the difference being that when the narcissist manipulates, stonewalls and gaslights, they're doing it for dominance and control.

Triangulation

Triangulation is a divide-and-conquer tactic to control relationships. It is very common in employment settings when there is a narcissist in the team. In this situation, it's impossible to avoid the person, so contact must be managed.

Rebecca used grey rock with her boss, Laura, who had a horrible habit of devaluing colleagues to each other, after baiting them into defending themselves. Laura also liked to drive wedges between people who were close, so she could be the hub of information and control its ebb and flow.

Laura: Morning, Rebecca. How was your weekend? What did you do?

Rebecca: Hi, Laura. Yeah, great thanks. How about you?

Laura: Oh yes, it was wonderful, thank you. We went to the most superb restaurant. It's very exclusive. Don't

you know it? Really? I'm surprised you haven't heard of it. Everyone is talking about it. The food was sublime and Gary is sure he saw Gordon Ramsay.

Rebecca: Sounds fabulous! I must get on now. Glad you had a great time.

What Rebecca did there was to ignore the baiting and information mining by turning the conversation back to Laura's favourite subject – herself.

It would have been easy for Rebecca to get sucked into defending her knowledge of the restaurant, or calling out the passive-aggressive dig, even. But that would only have served to give Laura supply. If Rebecca had taken the bait, Laura could then have told colleagues how sensitive Rebecca was. And if Rebecca had shared anything about her own weekend, it would again have been used by Laura to establish dominance somewhere else.

Information mining can be used to enable triangulation. So if Rebecca tells Laura she saw Sarah from work for drinks, Laura could go to their colleague Jenny and say, 'Did you have a nice time with Sarah and Rebecca at the weekend?' knowing full well Jenny hadn't been included and that it might sting to know this, thereby driving a wedge and manipulating relationships for her own benefit.

Dominance and superiority

Information mining is also what the narcissist uses to build power – the power of holding all the information.

Jack's mum often called, asking him loads of questions about his life, work, relationships, what the children were up to. But she was not asking conversationally:

Jack: 'She wanted to know every minute detail about my life, but it was like she was taking notes. She asked me who I was working with on a project at work, so I started telling her about Jason, but as soon as I said his name, she peppered me with questions about him – where he grew up, where he went to school/uni, was he married, any kids? She just fired them at me, until I eventually said I had to go. I felt invisible, like I was Google or something, just firing out answers.'

Jack's mother was information mining, so she could take that to other people and make it look like she was 'in the know', giving her superiority through having more information than others. Especially if the other person in question was Jack's wife.

Jack's mother would open a conversation with his wife about Jason from work, and then act surprised that his wife didn't know as much as she did. It would look innocent enough, but in reality she was trying to show her dominance and importance in Jack's life and make his wife feel disconnected from him because she was not as well informed as her.

Jack's mother did this because she felt threatened by his relationship with his wife. She was no longer number one in her son's life, so she tried to sabotage the marital relationship and reclaim her crown.

While Jack's mother would not have liked hearing the word 'no' when she started information mining, this was

where grey rock came in. When she called to ask him questions, it might have looked like this:

Mum: So what's going on with work? Any exciting new projects?

[Instead of telling her all about his new project, Jack could say:] Nothing exciting, haha! How have you been? How's the garden looking?

Jack's mum would continue to ask questions, but Jack would be reasonably dismissive with the 'not-much', 'nothing-new' approach, perhaps implying a special insight and closeness others don't have by saying, 'Oh, you know how it is, Mum – same old! Did you see your neighbour recently?' ultimately turning it back to his mum as often as possible.

In the face of information mining, it can be hard to hold boundaries and withhold information because the sense of entitlement is so brazen, and here we can again see where fear obligation and guilt have been weaponised so well that the idea of saying 'I'm not sharing that' is abhorrent to the child of the narcissist.

However, there's nothing wrong with holding information back. The narcissistic parent teaches their child that privacy is secrecy, which makes them feel morally reprehensible when they don't disclose everything. But nobody is entitled to know anything about someone else, unless there is a legal reason to suggest otherwise.

Justification and over-explaining

When someone grows up with a narcissistic parent, they learn that they have to explain why a need has to be met, or why they met

their own need. It's called justification. Justification – or over-explaining – is another thing that can be challenged using the grey rock method.

When Jane's mother asked her to do something she didn't want to do, instead of just saying 'no' or 'I'm busy', she often justified why she was saying no, which gave her mother room to challenge her. For example:

Jane's mum: I need you to take me to the shops at three o'clock today.

Jane: 'I'm so sorry, Mum, but I have to take the kids to swimming at three-thirty, so I won't be able to.

Jane's mum: Well you can take me at two-thirty, then. That gives you plenty of time to get me, drop me off and pick them up. Then you can pick me up after they've finished swimming and take me home before them.

Jane felt backed into a corner and so she said yes, despite not wanting to take her mother shopping at all. If Jane had used grey rock, it would have looked like this:

Jane's mum: I need you to take me to the shops at three o'clock today.

Jane: Sorry, I can't today. I'm busy.

Jane's mum: Too busy to take me to the shops?

Jane: Yes, sorry . . . speaking of which, I must get on. Have a good day. Bye.

By not justifying why she could not meet her mum's needs, Jane left no room for negotiation and was

therefore not manipulated into doing what her mum wanted. Jane's mum would have been annoyed at first, but eventually, she would have started to realise that she couldn't use Jane to do her bidding, and would stop asking.

Co-parenting is another situation where the grey rock method comes in useful. Again, it's about very boundaried, direct communication – no justifying or explaining or giving unnecessary information. When co-parenting with a narcissist, it's imperative that boundaries are tight, so the narcissist can't continue to dominate and control.

Megan: Can you pick Freddie up at five instead of six this Friday? I'm going away for the weekend and I need to leave at five-thirty.

Ex-partner: You want me to change *my* plans so you can get rid of your child to go on a jolly? No, I can't, and you should be ashamed of yourself. What kind of a mother wants to get rid of their kid?

By telling her ex why she wanted to move the pick-up time, Megan gave him power over her and an opportunity to criticise and shame her – not to mention ammunition for his smear campaign.

Instead, she could have made it look like she was doing her ex a favour by letting him collect their son early:

Megan: Hiya, do you want to pick Freddie up at five on Friday?

Ex-partner: Why?

Megan: Just in case the traffic's bad, no big deal.

Ex partner: Yeah, OK then.

By not explaining that she had a need she wanted met (a plan that her ex could sabotage), Megan protected herself and her plans.

Grey rock method goes against every conditioned instinct of the victim of the narcissist. It feels rude and manipulative and unkind – but it isn't. As we said, no one is entitled to information about anyone else, and no one should have so much power over another that they can control the path of their life by disrupting plans and relationships. If someone needs to use the grey rock method to stay safe and protect their peace, there's nothing at all wrong with that.

Yellow rock method

An extension of the grey rock method, the yellow rock method is still no nonsense, only with a few niceties thrown in. It was created by One Mom's Battle (find it on youtube.com: @OneMomsBattle) to describe a method of communication that would stand up to scrutiny from court officials in regards to custody issues.

It might look like this:

Megan: 'Hiya, Freddie is ready for the weekend. I hope you guys have a good time.'

Megan's ex can't say anything negative about that communication. It's not bitter, it's not cold, it's not provocative in any way. It doesn't look obstructive to an onlooker.

However, yellow rock doesn't mean ignoring attacks altogether. In fact, it's quite the opposite. So it might look like this:

Megan's ex: What kind of a mother are you? You lie in bed all day, and how many men are you bringing to the house where my son is? You're a terrible parent.'

Megan: 'I notice your attempt to portray me as a bad parent. I disagree with your interpretation.'

Here, instead of ignoring the attack altogether, Megan acknowledges it but makes it clear she disagrees with it. She doesn't engage or defend herself; she holds her boundaries and calls out attacks and attempts to devalue her.

The rock method(s) takes some practice. At first it can feel unfamiliar and difficult and may even trigger a fear response because it goes against everything that the child of a narcissist is taught about compliance, obedience and autonomy. But there is absolutely nothing bad about someone protecting themselves from attack from a person who will never see reason, much less take accountability. Remember: a narcissist will view any attempt at seeking fairness as a weakness to be exploited – because they can use that knowledge against you.

CHAPTER 12

F*ck Forgiveness

> Rebecca: 'I'm not bitter. I'm not even angry. But I'm never forgiving her. She should have known better – and I think she did know. She didn't want me to tell anyone what she was doing to me because she knew it would make her look bad. She still did it, though. Why should I forgive that?'

When people talk about forgiveness, they're usually suggesting that someone should forgive to 'be the bigger person', 'do the right thing', 'forgive and forget'. The concept of forgiveness is often completely misunderstood, and as a result, it is regularly weaponised to absolve the abuser of their responsibility.

For the child of the narcissist this weaponising is taken to the next level, suggesting that if they're unable to forgive, there's something inherently wrong with them. Because the narcissistic parent teaches from birth that 'good' children forgive and forget and only mean, heartless, selfish ones stay angry and hold a grudge.

The level of social pressure applied to adult children of narcissists to forgive their parents of the most heinous acts of abuse and neglect is shocking. It gaslights our clients and can send them back into the pit of denial, questioning whether what they have endured really was abuse. The pressure also comes from enabling friends and family to forgive and forget the abuser's behaviour; this ignites

the adult child's critical voice to an intense level that minimises and dismisses their abuse, slowing down and even arresting their healing process. It is grossly unfair.

Compassion

Our clients may sit in a place of compassion for their narcissistic parents, recognising that they too were victims of abuse. They may have empathy for how unfair and neglectful their parents' own parents were. However, if they enter into this space too early on in their healing, it can really hinder their progress, preventing them from feeling compassion for themselves and their experience.

When someone is asked to have empathy for their abuser's trauma as a reason to forgive them, they're essentially being told that the abuse they suffered was justified. That is abhorrent. It silences healthy anger and outrage at the treatment they were shown, and, on top of that, shames them for demanding that their abuser (their parent, in this case) takes responsibility for their behaviour. *Trauma does not justify abuse!*

Furthermore, the demand to show empathy for the abuser's own wounds can perpetuate a conditioned pattern of behaviour – prioritising the parent's feelings and holding the child responsible for repairing a relationship they didn't break – and with it, the pattern of abuse.

Because the narcissistic parent never takes accountability or responsibility, by default the child is blamed whenever conflict or fractures in the relationship arise. And when the child demands the narcissistic parent takes responsibility, and refuses to 'let it go', they are labelled fundamentally flawed, argumentative, bitter

and the cause of all the drama. Ultimately, they're told that if they can't forgive, they, and not their parent, are in the wrong: the adult child is the problem.

But *you are not the problem.*

Forgiving the narcissistic parent

When someone who has hurt you is accountable for their behaviour, owns up to how it has impacted you, is truly sorry, seeks forgiveness and then actively changes their behaviour, forgiveness can have many emotional benefits and can be both positive and healing. However, it is our experience that the narcissistic parent will never do this, and *we firmly believe* that forgiveness is not fundamental to the adult child's healing.

Some things are beyond forgiveness. The narcissistic parent is not entitled to be absolved of responsibility for the things they have done to their children and the way they have negatively impacted their lives.

If there is any forgiveness to be had, it's towards the small, confused, scared child who had no understanding of what was being done to them or how to make their parents love them. The way they were treated was not their fault. There was nothing they could have done to prevent or change it, and they were certainly not being difficult. The child was just doing everything they could to stay safe, and all they were looking for was to be loved by the person who could not show them that very basic human emotion.

Children of narcissists have been unloved, emotionally abused and neglected, and some have also been subjected to other forms of abuse, such as physical, financial and sexual

abuse. We do not condone abuse of any kind. And that includes neglect – because it is abusive, too. Nor do we enable the protection of abusive parents. You do not have to forgive your abuser in order to heal.

While we do not preach forgiveness of the narcissistic parent, this is a personal journey, so if you feel that it is the right thing for you to do, then it is right for you. If you choose not to forgive your abuser, however, it is your responsibility to ensure that the bitterness and rage do not consume you. Letting go of these is essential for you to be able to live your life freely, whereas holding on to them will cloud your relationships and keep you shackled to your narcissistic parent.

> Megan: 'I watched a movie about an unmothered child. Through the compassion I felt for this child, I finally connected with my inner child and had such compassion for her. I allowed her to grieve and I held her. I wept for her. Through that grief, I was able to let go of my mother. I knew that the worst she could do to me, she had already done. I knew that from hereon in, I could provide my younger self with what she needed.'

Living in hope and denial protects you from your grief; you are in denial when you minimise and deny the pain you felt in those childhood experiences. In order to heal, you need to grieve. There comes a point when staying in relationships that wound you is an act of self-harm; denying the reality of how badly the narcissist in your life hurt you, and is certain to hurt you again, is exactly that: self-harm.

Forgiveness of self

Rebecca: 'Why did I stay with them for so long? I knew what they were like. I saw the red flags, yet I just ignored them, hoping that they would change. How could I be so f*cking stupid?'

It was not Rebecca's fault that she was abused. She didn't cause it and she was not to blame.

Rebecca did not need to forgive her abuser in order to heal; however, she did need to forgive herself for ever thinking that it was her fault.

She had to forgive herself for not knowing it was abuse.

She had to forgive herself for ever thinking that this was all she deserved.

She had to forgive herself for not leaving sooner.

She had to forgive herself for believing the lies.

All victims of abuse blame themselves for staying in a relationship with their abuser and not leaving sooner. But it's not their fault. They were abused in childhood. Their parents presided over them with manipulation, dominance and control and told them this was love, so that became the version of love that they sought. They were taught that it was not healthy to hold people accountable for their behaviour and if they did they would be abandoned or discarded, so they do not hold their partners accountable either. They were mocked, shamed and ridiculed as children, so it doesn't seem strange when their partners do that to them, too.

They accepted their parents because their survival depended on it, and because they had been conditioned to believe that they, the child, were the problem. But their lack of understanding blinds them as adults in their romantic relationships. They do not see it as abuse because they do not understand that they were abused in childhood. Their self-worth is almost non-existent, and they are easy prey for an abuser.

Jane thought many times about leaving her husband, but the shame of a failed marriage prevented her. The thought of being divorced touched her not-good-enough wound and her self-worth was so attached to her role as a wife that she could not bear the guilt and shame. Jane's biggest fear was that she would be damaged goods, and this would confirm her childhood conditioning that she was a mistake and unlovable.

Jane's block was her shame. Working on her forgiveness and compassion for herself was what she needed to do to shift the shame.

Jane needed to forgive herself for taking care of her partner to the exclusion of herself.

She needed to forgive herself for being a mother to her partner.

She needed to forgive herself for not knowing her own needs.

She needed to forgive herself for blaming and berating herself for not being strong enough or tough enough to stand up to her abusive husband.

She needed to forgive herself for not knowing what a healthy relationship looked like.

Jack: 'I don't have all these feelings like my wife. Sometimes I just hate her for being so needy. It's weak to be so needy. She needs to man up a bit and give me space to breathe.'

Jack was never manly enough for his father to accept him, and he was never allowed to be autonomous with his mother. He was neglected by one parent and engulfed by the other, and both these behaviours are abusive.

Jack needed to forgive himself for not being enough for his father. There was nothing wrong with him. It wasn't his fault.

He needed to forgive himself for ever thinking he was 'wrong' or 'weak' for wanting validation, love and his father's approval.

He needed to forgive himself for not knowing his mother was covertly sexually abusing him.

He needed to forgive himself for being repulsed by intimacy.

He needed to forgive himself for denying his emotional needs all his life.

He needed to forgive himself for being scared of love.

Every time Megan felt hopeful her mother could change, she got lulled into a false sense of security.

'How can I keep being so f*cking stupid? How many times do I have to learn the lesson that the only person she cares about is herself? I feel like a bloody child putting my

arms out for affection, to be seen, only to get my hands slapped away and retreat like a scolded kid. When will I learn?'

Megan's hope for her mother to change was protecting her against the grief for the mother she wished she'd had – for the attention and affection she wished for and the need to be seen.

'I hate that at forty-one-years-old. I'm still a f*cking child around her.'

Megan had to forgive herself for wanting a mother. It is the most natural thing in the world to want to be loved and cared for by your parent.

Megan needed to forgive herself for wanting to leave without guilt and return without punishment.

Megan needed to forgive herself for wanting her mother to change.

Megan needed to forgive herself for constantly going back in the hope that things would be different.

Having compassion and forgiveness for ourselves is an act of healing we deserve. It's important that they do not absolve us of responsibility for our behaviours and choices, though. In fact, that's exactly where we can claim our power and ownership of ourselves – recognising where we made choices we would make differently today, with the knowledge we have now. We do this without shame or blame or judgement, because we didn't know what we didn't know, and now we do know, we can change direction. And the power in that knowledge, alongside compassion and kindness, is one of the greatest gifts we can give ourselves.

Understanding forgiveness

Some people draw on religious and spiritual beliefs to help them to forgive. There can be considerable shaming and judgement when someone chooses not to prioritise forgiveness in religious teachings and also in the twelve-step recovery programme, which advocates that true forgiveness is wishing the person well and praying for them to have all they wish for. Twelve steps pushes it even further by encouraging you to pray for the person who has hurt you to have all the things that you want for yourself – health, wealth and happiness.

As we said, we are not preaching forgiveness. It is up to you whether or not you choose to forgive. It is both a totally personal choice, and a fluid decision. So if you change your mind about it one way or the other, that's totally fine, too. Your autonomy is paramount. As is respecting the autonomy of others in their feelings about forgiveness.

Choosing to forgive does not mean that you are condoning the abusive behaviour. It does not mean absolution. You can still know that the person in question's behaviour was wrong and choose to forgive for yourself – to help you let go of your anger and resentment.

Having said that, choosing not to forgive does not mean that you can't release yourself. You can still do so by accepting who they really are, which means you are no longer denying that, protecting them, becoming entangled in their way of being. By accepting who they really are, you let go of who you wished they were, and you can then grieve for the life you deserved.

When you learn how to grieve for your own emotional abandonment with self-compassion, self-empathy and self-understanding (not self-gaslighting, self-minimising and denial),

you can feel at peace and attain a sense of love for yourself and belonging in the world. Doing this work will shift you away from the helpless, powerless victim mentality that keeps you attached to your narcissistic parent and controlled by their failings.

Seeking forgiveness

Being able to take accountability and offer a sincere apology when we hurt someone is essential for healthy relationships.

> Whenever Megan's partner was unhappy with something she did, Megan really struggled to admit she was wrong and would strongly defend herself. This was Megan defending her inner child and trying to protect her from the experience of abandonment. However, in the relationship with her partner, Megan's younger self didn't need to be protected; she needed to be shown that it was safe to make a mistake and be held accountable – and how that was completely different from being shamed and punished.

Children of narcissists are shamed when they have to apologise, making this something they can really struggle with as adults.

Saying sorry means . . .

If you walk down the street and bump into somebody by accident, what is the first thing you say? If you are a healthy person, you would say sorry. Why? Because you are apologising for the impact

your behaviour had, not for the intention behind it. An unhealthy person simply blames the other person for getting in their way.

We all make mistakes and sometimes hurt people with our words or behaviours, whether accidentally or intentionally. It is vital to take accountability for the hurt we cause. In a healthy relationship, we apologise when somebody tells us we hurt their feelings, even if it was not our intention – we apologise for the *impact* of our behaviour.

What is an apology?

. . . accepting responsibility . . .

> Jack never admitted accountability. There was always someone else at fault. It was his boss's fault he worked so much; the kids' fault he lost his temper; his wife's fault he forgot to take the bins out . . .

Being accountable means taking ownership for the situations you're involved in and their outcome, whether good or bad. You don't blame others when things go wrong. Instead, you admit your mistake, own your part and accept responsibility.

> Rebecca's emotional responses were so extreme that when one of her friends even hinted at how her behaviour had hurt them, her response led them to not be open with her about this again. Although this may sound ideal (lol), it led to resentment and her friend pulling away, which only served to heighten Rebecca's anxiety.

Accepting responsibility leads to healthier relationships. If you struggle with it, ask yourself this: what you would do differently if you could go back in time and relive the event? This helps you to see what you need to take responsibility for. In Rebecca's case, she could perhaps have recognised that getting angry wasn't helpful – she could be calmer, while still conveying the same message. So she could apologise to her friend for her tone and the way she spoke, even though she still maintains the point she held in the first place.

. . . offering atonement . . .

When somebody accepts accountability, the next step is to offer atonement. To make amends, try to repair and ask if there is a way to make it up to the person.

> When Jack took responsibility and apologised for losing his patience with his kids, he offered to make amends. All they had wanted was for him to be present with them, to listen and play with them, without shouting or being on his phone.

. . . changing behaviour

This is essential to an apology because without changed behaviour, any other aspect of it is just manipulation.

When is an apology not an apology?

- When it contains the words 'I'm sorry you feel like that.' When someone says that, what they're saying is, 'I'm sorry

for your feelings. They're not my responsibility, but I'm sorry you've got them!'

- When someone says, 'I'm sorry if it seemed like that.' That's not saying, 'Yes, I did the thing,' it's saying, 'I'm sorry *you think* I did the thing, but I'm not going to admit I did it.'
- When someone says, 'That wasn't my intention.' This is a tricky one, because impact is more important than intention, but sometimes we hurt people without realising. What we might say in that case is: 'I know it hurt you, and I accept that's my responsibility. I shouldn't have done it, and I won't do it again. I want you to know that had I known it would hurt you, I absolutely wouldn't have done it. I'm so sorry for hurting you.'

And finally, the big 'but':

- When someone says, 'I'm sorry, but . . .' what they're really saying is, 'I've got a justification as to why I treated you the way I did and it's more important than your feelings about it.'

People can find it very hard to accept responsibility, but this is a giant bullsh*t filter to look out for. When someone finds excuses as to why it's OK that they hurt you the way they did, it's time to run. It won't get better. In fact, it'll likely get worse.

Forgiveness is personal. If someone wants to work towards it, that's totally fine; if they don't, that's also fine. We each have to find our own way to healing, and forgiving our abusers is not necessary for that.

CHAPTER 13

Boundaries

Jane: 'Being able to say no to him has been the most liberating thing. The same with my mother. They're not happy about it, but I am. I'm not being taken advantage of any more, and I don't feel like I have to fix every little thing that happens to every single person. I feel physically lighter. It's amazing.'

Setting boundaries is expressing our wants, needs and preferences and working through our fear of shame and rejection. To shift our focus and listen to our internal voice takes time. It is not something we do in one fell swoop, but something we build on. Creating trust within ourselves and honing (or honouring) our inner voice requires us to pause and check in with how we are feeling regularly. We need to do this often because our needs change often. What we need at the beginning of the day can look very different from what we need at the end. And everybody's needs will be different. So it's important not to compare, as this again leads us down an external route – where we lose our edges and merge with the wishes, needs and demands of others.

Our boundaries are there to take care of us. They are our yes and our no. Identifying, expressing and holding boundaries has to be learned. They are an essential component in every single relationship we have and in keeping them healthy. They let our partner/friends/family know what we want, and how we want to

be treated – and, more importantly, how we do not want to be treated. The quality of our relationships determines the quality of our lives.

To set and hold healthy personal boundaries is to step out of survival mode and into our autonomy. They are the borders between what we find comfortable and uncomfortable, and knowing what they are and being able to disclose them to the people with whom we interact is essential.

Our boundaries are built on our value systems and identities, which is why it's so important to invest time growing our identities.

There are many types of boundaries: physical, sexual, financial, emotional, spiritual, time, space and more. In healthy relationships, boundaries are welcomed and respected, even if they're not always agreed with. They keep people in, as well as keeping people out. They help us know whether someone is working with us or against us. If someone disregards, dismisses or disrespects our boundaries, they are telling us that they disregard, dismiss and disrespect us.

That said, it's important to understand that we don't demand that other people prioritise our boundaries above their own to be in relationship with us. That's for us to do. Boundaries are not about controlling others; they're based on our value and belief system, which is for us to maintain. If our boundaries clash with someone else's, they are not aligned and we probably shouldn't be in relationship with them. But it doesn't mean that ours are better than theirs – only that theirs are different. Boundaries are signals to show us who is safe for us, and who isn't. They're not an exercise in superiority.

If, for example, one of Jack's boundaries was not disclosing his salary, he was not saying that nobody else could talk about their own salary – he just wouldn't discuss his. And if people continued

to ask about it, repeatedly crossing this boundary, despite him making it clear that he didn't want to discuss it, then it was for him to decide whether or not he wanted to stay in a relationship with them.

Someone who was raised by a narcissistic parent will not have come through their childhood with healthy boundaries and, as a result, they will not be able to express their needs in a healthy way. Their family environment will have weakened their boundaries, which are still there, but have shrunk from lack of use, just like muscles. And they are so feeble, that attempts to exercise them may be difficult and painful.

So when someone starts building their identity, they have to start building those muscles. At first, it makes them feel uncomfortable, alien and a bit wobbly. They don't have much control over them. But with exercise, they get stronger; their connection and control become smoother, more supple and more intuitive. Exercising boundaries may mean that they are excessively rigid to begin with, as the person throws them down all over the place, triumphantly, but clumsily. But as they become more familiar with laying them down – and with themselves – they learn where and where not to be relaxed.

As well as improving our relationships with others, boundaries improve our relationship with ourselves – because every time we honour them, we build our self-worth and self-esteem. They are what shows our individuality. They highlight where we end and someone else begins, allowing us to exist independently, so that we do not need to use hyper-dependent or hyper-independent coping mechanisms. They separate our emotions, wants and needs from others'. They can be determined as how emotionally close we allow someone to get to us and they are the lines we draw within relationships to define what we will not tolerate.

Boundaries are the choices we make to live a peaceful healthy life. When someone says, 'I don't have a choice. I have to do X for my partner/parent,' what they're actually saying is, 'I don't want to make the choice that benefits me because I don't want to face the conflict of putting my needs first. Because people punish me when I do.'

If we don't know what our boundaries are, others will not know either. And when they are unclear or non-existent, people can use that for their own gain. Again, we cannot change others. So our responsibility is to establish our limits and clearly express them.

Healthy anger and boundaries

Anger is healthy. It's a transformative emotion that is often confused with aggression or rage and is therefore suppressed, as we're taught it's 'bad' in ourselves, while in our parents it feels threatening and dangerous. However, healthy anger protects us from what we feel is wrong, unfair, unjustified. It is not intended to be projected on to someone else. Rather, it's an emotion to indicate or highlight where we've been wronged, and signals to us we need to change something in our lives or seek justice.

Anger gives us agency for change. It propels us to act and motivates us to find a solution. Without access to our anger, we are deprived of the ability to notice when something is abusive or neglectful in our environment or relationships.

If we did not have the powerful emotion of anger, there would instead be passive acceptance and tolerance of violations, which allows others to exploit us. Anger does not mean forsaking generosity, gentleness, empathy or sensitivity. It means deciding not to be afraid of our autonomy and asserting our power to effect

change. Because when we bury our anger, we teach people to be insensitive to our needs and desires.

From external to internal focus

Based on our needs, boundaries relate to our internal experience, rather than other people's expectations. This is a radical shift from the experience of the child raised by a narcissist, and it can take time for them to move their focus from external to internal and cultivate an internal dialogue: what do *I* want? What do *I* need?

When we don't turn inwards, we are more likely to overextend ourselves and become resentful as a result. That resentment then seeps into all areas of our lives – our friendships, marriage, relationships with colleagues and even with our children. To be the person we want to be in all our relationships, we need to break the cycle and how we do this is by expressing and holding our boundaries.

At her nail appointment Megan, who was growing accustomed to checking in with herself, wanted to listen to a podcast. Her critical voice was not as loud as usual, but she was still plagued with nagging doubts: what if the nail technician thinks I'm being rude? Is it disrespectful to be wearing earphones? Will they think I'm self-centred and unfriendly?

Then Megan remembered to listen to the inner healthy parent she was working on, who said, 'You are paying for a service. You are entitled to spend that time how you like, as long as you don't disrupt the woman doing her job or anyone else in the salon.'

Still recovering from seeking external validation, Megan decided to check with the nail technician first: 'Is it OK with you if I listen to a podcast while you do my nails?' The woman's response surprised Megan. 'Yeah, absolutely,' she said, 'and I'll actually get my work done faster that way.' This made Megan realise there was people pleasing going on both ways in the relationship.

Moving from powerless child to autonomous adult means recognising we have power in our voice. We have agency. We have choices, albeit difficult ones sometimes. This doesn't mean we have to walk away from every relationship, but it means we have the freedom to decide whether we want to continue with things as they are.

Every time Megan's mother went to her house, she criticised and behaved disrespectfully towards her daughter. Megan, who was working on her boundaries, politely asked her mother not to comment on her house, her parenting, her partner, her lifestyle, to which her mother replied, 'I've always been like this. I just say it like it is. If you don't like that, it's your problem – you're always so sensitive.'

Megan's mother was clearly showing that she didn't care how her behaviour was impacting her daughter and that her response was her problem. There was a truth in what her mother said. This *was* now Megan's problem. Megan agonised and vented, telling everyone who would listen how disrespectful her mother was. However, the part Megan

couldn't see was that by not holding her boundary around the behaviour, *she* was actually disrespecting herself.

In Megan's healing, she moved from a place of hurt and helplessness by asking her mother numerous times to stop constantly criticising, belittling and devaluing her. She told her mother how negatively her criticism was impacting her. However, her mother not only refused to accept this, she also mocked Megan for even suggesting such a thing. So she then had a choice: either to continue to sit in powerlessness and disempowerment or move to empowerment and hold a boundary for her own wellbeing, even if that cost her the relationship.

But there's the rub, right? Because sitting in the powerlessness meant that Megan could avoid the pain of ending the relationship. If she held the boundary, she was faced with the very painful reality that her mother was willing to sacrifice their relationship for the right to wound her daughter, regardless of the impact.

Speaking up is not easy. However, it is essential in healing. Megan was responsible for herself and her space. How and what she tolerated was sending an unspoken message to everyone in her life about what she would and would not allow in relationships. To stand up and say no to disrespectful behaviour is modelling to others how we would like to be treated. It is also being true to ourselves and showing our children what a healthy relationship looks like.

We cannot control other people, but we can use our boundaries to control who has access to us.

What do boundaries sound like?

The following are examples of what boundaries might sound like; they might be spoken aloud explicitly or held as our inner voice to protect us:

- Thank you for the invite, but I'm unable to attend.
- I'm not obligated to explain myself to you.
- I cannot commit to that.
- I'm not comfortable doing that.
- I am not responsible for your behaviour.
- Leave that with me and I'll get back to you.
- I cannot fit that into my schedule right now.
- I don't have capacity to provide that for you.
- I won't allow you to use guilt to control me.
- I am not responsible for the consequences of your actions.
- My feelings are just as important as yours.
- I've not finished speaking.
- I'm no longer participating in something that doesn't feel right to me.
- I don't owe you an explanation.
- I'm feeling overwhelmed right now; I need a break. I will come back to you in [X] hours.
- I'm not prepared to discuss that any further.
- I'm not seeking your approval.
- I will no longer trade being authentic with being nice.
- I will not remain in the company of those who mock, shame, ridicule or belittle me.
- My weight/romantic life/reproductive system is not up for discussion.
- I'm not taking feedback on this.
- No.
- I've already said no.

Preferences vs boundaries

A preference is having or expressing a liking or wanting one thing more than another.

Jane never asked for what she wanted. She always went with the flow to keep others happy. Then, on a night out, she plucked up the courage to say she would like to go to an Indian restaurant, but her two friends overruled her. 'I always do what they want and the one time I let them know what I want to do, they won't do it,' she said.

Jane didn't express a boundary. She stated a preference, and she didn't negotiate. Let's look at the difference between these:

Preference: 'I would rather go to an Indian restaurant.'

Boundary: 'If you guys want to go somewhere else, that's cool, but I'm going to the Indian and will meet you after.' (There was no punishment for the others for not meeting the preference, but it was held as a boundary by Jane not going to their chosen restaurant.)

Negotiating phrase: 'OK, we'll go to that restaurant this time and the Indian next time.' (Then, should the friends not go to the Indian the next time, Jane could hold the boundary and choose whether or not she wants to stay in relationship with people who break their promises and don't allow her needs/preferences to be met.)

Requests vs boundaries

A request is asking someone to meet your need. (Requesting that someone alters their behaviour leaves room for that person's no.)

Setting a boundary, on the other hand, is stating what you are willing or unwilling to accept. It is not a request that the other person can choose to accept or not.

Request: 'Don't speak to me or my kids that way.'

Boundary: 'I do not remain in conversation with or in the company of someone who speaks to me like that.'

Jane's older brother was always rude and abusive whenever she saw him. She reduced her contact with him as much as possible. However, occasionally, he would still go to her house so that their kids could play football together.

How we are in one relationship is how we are in all relationships, albeit filtered, depending on the type of relationship. So it is no surprise that Jane's brother was also emotionally abusive to her kids. When Jane was out of earshot, he would jeer, mock, humiliate and call her kids names while playing football with them. He would physically intimidate them, while aggressively manhandling his own children. Whenever Jane witnessed this behaviour, she asked him to stop, but he dismissed, mocked and ignored her.

Fearful of her brother and of her extended family's reaction if she tried to set a boundary, Jane decided instead that she and her husband would referee her brother's football game with the kids and try to mitigate his behaviour. (The irony is not lost on us here either: they were babysitting the adult, not the children!) For a short period, her brother's behaviour improved, but he soon reverted to his old ways.

Jane could not control her brother's behaviour or the family narrative. However, she could control her own behaviour and what she was willing to tolerate and subject

her family to. So she set a boundary with her brother and told him that he was no longer welcome in their home because of his abusive behaviour.

In a healthy extended family, the other family members would be horrified at Jane's brother's behaviour and see it as unacceptable and abusive. They would hold him accountable and be proud of Jane for standing up for herself and her children. In a narcissistic family system, however, the fallout can be brutal and the person who calls out the abuse is often scapegoated and labelled the villain. Although this is extremely distressing and we are not in any way minimising the pain or grief that can come from it, it is yet another example of the toxic family dynamic and how, if we don't say no and call it out or stand up for ourselves, we are colluding and will be repeatedly abused. And the abuse can repeat, generation after generation.

Enabling and rescuing vs empathy, empowering and helping

Enabling: creating conditions in which someone can continue toxic or unhealthy behaviours.

Rescuing: taking over from someone and doing things *for* them, instead of letting them do it for themselves – this could be in the context of tasks, emotions or problems. It's trying to fix things that aren't ours to fix.

Empathy: understanding why someone might feel the way they do, and allowing them space to feel it, without trying to fix or rescue them.

Empowering: helping someone to find their own solutions to their problems; showing them they have the resources to take charge of their life and situations.

Helping: assisting someone to solve their problems, being a sounding board, supporting them with executing plans – say, sending them a link to a job advert, rather than applying for the job for them. This is opposite to rescuing.

Enabling behaviours

Jane: 'My dad rang me the other day and told me to apologise to my mum for the argument we'd had. I told him it wasn't my fault – I just asked her not to post a picture of the children on social media, and she got really angry and called me all the names under the sun. He just replied, "Ah, you know what she's like. Be a love and be the bigger person – just apologise, so it's over and done with."'

Jane's father is enabling his wife's toxic behaviour by not holding her accountable and instead asking Jane to apologise, even though he knows his wife is in the wrong. He's creating an environment that allows Jane's mother to continue behaving the way she does by pushing the responsibility for repairing the relationship on to Jane.

Furthermore, if Jane does apologise to keep the peace, and 'be the bigger person' (which always means tolerating sh*t behaviour, by the way!), she is also party to enabling the behaviour from not only Mum, but Dad, too.

Rebecca: 'This guy at work is always late for his shift, and he takes over from me. I'm so sick of it. He gets paid for my

time! I'm not doing it any more. I'm just going to leave at the end of my shift. I'm not taking it any more.'

By holding the time boundary with her colleague, Rebecca was making him responsible for the ten minutes he was missing of work. If she'd kept covering for him, she'd have been enabling his lateness and hurting herself in the long run.

Rescuing behaviours

Megan: 'My mum had loads of people coming over one Saturday night, and having spent the day in town shopping she hadn't cleaned the house. She was panicking about it so much, I just did it for her. Now I look at that and think she set me up the whole time: why did she go shopping?'

Rebecca: 'Ah, my friend was really struggling because she couldn't get tickets to a show for the kids, so I bought them for her and sent them. I should have just sent her the link, really. It wasn't for me to buy the tickets.'

Rescuing is unhealthy because it disempowers someone and can create a co-dependency, where two people are overly dependent on each other to survive. In the narcissistic family, the narcissistic parent will sometimes encourage rescuing from their children or partner, weaponising their victim space to force that co-dependency and keeping people close and enmeshed, so they don't leave.

In non-familial relationships, rescuing will eventually suffocate the person who's being rescued and leave them feeling unable to

do things for themselves. The rescuer gets their value and worth from all they are doing, but what typically happens is that when the person they are rescuing says 'no, thank you,' they feel rejected and wounded and take it very personally.

Empathy

We show empathy by letting people know we understand how they feel after asking them and not assuming.

Jack: 'When my friend got made redundant, I had to check whether he was happy or sad. When he said he was sad about it, I listened to him talking about it and asked him what he wanted to do. In the past I would have assumed he would feel the same way I did, but this time, I didn't, and I didn't try and fix it for him either. It was difficult at first, but it really changed the way my friend spoke to me about it. It felt good to help him instead of fixing.'

Jane: 'When my daughter was left out of the school play I felt terrible for her and wanted to ring the teacher and insist they include her. But when I asked her how she felt, she said sad, but that she didn't want to be included if they didn't want her. I told her I understood why she felt sad and that it was OK to be sad. I'm so glad I didn't ring the teacher. It would have made my daughter so uncomfortable and it wouldn't have helped at all. Instead, we are going to go for pizza when the play is on, which is what she wants, so I'm happy to do that with her.'

What empathy sounds like:

- You seem a little off today. Would you like to chat?
- That sounds like a lot. How is this impacting you?
- That sounds really sad. How are you feeling about it?
- I think I would feel really hopeless in that situation – how did it make you feel?
- I understand how much courage that took to share. Thank you for trusting me with it.
- Cutting off your parents sounds like a huge decision for you to have to make. I'm so sorry it came to that. It sounds really tough.

Allowing children to develop autonomy

Adults need to be responsible for their own lives, so children need to learn responsibility for themselves so they grow into healthy adults.

When Jane's kids were sad, disappointed or frustrated, Jane would rescue them from their emotions because she couldn't bear to see them in so much emotional discomfort and she was scared of their anger. In doing so, she was centring her own emotions and not leaving space for her children to have their own experience and emotions.

The fear of a child's anger is incredibly common in adult children of narcissists when they become parents because it's a trigger point for them. When they were small, if they got angry, they got shamed, humiliated, punished and abandoned. So when her own children were angry, Jane was flung back into her child self, feeling a threat to her own safety.

What Jane needed to realise was firstly, that she was being triggered, and secondly, that she was now safe. Her child's anger didn't threaten her safety, because she was no longer a child herself. The caveat here, of course, is that if Jane's husband got angry with her when the children were angry, it remained a threat that capitalised on the wound from childhood. As a result, Jane would try to contain and silence her children's anger for fear that her husband would get angry, too. That meant it wasn't safe for her children to express their emotions, and Jane (and her husband) were perpetuating the cycle of generational trauma, rather than breaking it.

When Megan's kids were sad, disappointed or frustrated, Megan had short-lived compassion. After her first few attempts at empathising and allowing space for their emotions, she became frustrated and cross with them.

Both Jane and Megan were becoming overwhelmed by their children's emotions. To find their edges, they needed to separate their emotions from those of their children.

Jane needed to hold her boundary to allow her kids to feel their feelings without stepping in to rescue them and without centring herself. Taking a break, walking away for a few minutes, asking her husband to intervene, journaling or taking a deep breath to regulate her nervous system were all ways to help her hold her boundary.

For Megan, holding her boundaries meant getting in touch with her values – autonomy and freedom of self-expression. It meant reparenting her younger self in that moment and asking what that self needed right then, which was to calm herself (emotionally regulate) and allow space for her children's emotions, so that they didn't dominate the environment.

Owning our own part and not enabling

Having good boundaries means recognising how our behaviour might contribute to situations that frustrate or hurt us. That's not to victim blame or say we are responsible for how someone treats us, but to empower us to see what in our behaviour we could change to protect ourselves.

Every year, Megan would pack the kids' clothes for their holiday. She couldn't trust that they would do it properly – it seemed easier than them forgetting things and making a mess – and because she had always done it, her children didn't just expect it, they felt entitled to it and aggrieved if they were asked to do it instead.

It was now Megan's responsibility to own her part in this – to recognise that she had enabled them and needed to address it.

Unable to give up total control, and also recognising her children might need help, Megan told them it was their job to write out a list of the things they had to pack. She refrained from over-explaining and told them to make one list for clothing and another for personal hygiene. That way, the kids had to take responsibility and use their critical thinking.

To avoid rescuing, Megan told them that if they forgot any clothes, they could hand wash them in the bathtub on the holiday. Of course, if they actually did forget to pack stuff, Megan would help them to wash their clothes, but not do it for them. She would hold them accountable by not rescuing them from the consequences of their action or inaction. For her youngest, who was not able to write, she supervised and made a game of him counting out seven pairs of pants, socks and T-shirts and helped him with packing them into his bag.

Children have little control over their daily lives and Megan thought that she was protecting hers from anxiety and stress by doing everything for them. However, micro-managing children's lives is not beneficial to them. They can become infantilised and entitled and expect others to do things for them on demand. Allowing them to make their own decisions and mistakes, in a safe way, teaches them to use their critical thinking and cope with life's disappointments and challenges.

Demands vs requests

Demanding uses passive aggression to give someone the silent treatment, blame, shame and motivational empathy to try to manipulate and control their behaviour. Demanding is punishing someone for their no. It is the opposite of a request. A request allows room for someone's no without fear of punishment or retribution.

> When Jack told his mother he was spending Mother's Day with his wife, the mother of his children, she said, 'Oh. I'm very disappointed. I was really looking forward to spending Mother's Day with you, but if you don't care about your own mother that's fine.' She then proceeded to give him the silent treatment.

Demands don't sit well in healthy relationships. If we are having to make demands of someone to meet our needs, then what they're communicating to us passively is that our needs aren't important to them, or that they're not attuned to us.

Responsibilities and boundaries

Growing up in a narcissistic family system means a child is taught to believe that they are responsible for others' feelings and behaviour. That's not true. If you hurt someone, and they tell you what you did that hurt them, you may need to apologise, as long as what they are saying is valid, and you're not being asked to take responsibility for feelings that have manifested due to the other person's wounds.

A good way to get clarity on this is to ask yourself, 'If I could go back and do it again, would I do anything differently?' or, 'Would I have felt hurt if the same thing had been done to me?'

Remember, when you start taking responsibility for your behaviour, you can become defensive because you don't want to have made a mistake or be rejected for it. But if you start justifying and defending, you need to reflect – because usually, in those cases, you might have something to apologise for.

Responsibility boundaries

> Rebecca: 'The minute I see someone in a bad mood I think it's because of me.'

If someone is annoyed with you or hurt by something you did, it is their responsibility to tell you. You may be hypervigilant and notice a shift in their tone or facial expression, but you are not a mind reader. Hold your edges and boundaries, rather than let fear and the assumption that it is your fault control your behaviour.

To have authentic relationships you have to be able to trust – to trust that if your friend or partner is upset with you, they will tell you, and if they don't, then that is their prerogative. So the question for you is: do you want someone who doesn't clearly communicate with you to play a role in your life? If yes, you need to decide how big a part they play, and ask yourself whether your decision to have them in your life is led by FOG.

Your responsibility in healthy relationships:

- Saying no to anything you don't want to do
- Addressing problems directly with the person involved, rather than through a third party
- Expressing your expectations, rather than hoping others will figure them out
- Expressing your feelings responsibly
- Communicating your wants, needs and preferences
- Talking about your experience honestly; for example, 'No, I didn't have a good time'

Time boundaries

You are responsible for the people who have access to you and have a right to decide with whom and where you spend your time. Choosing who you want (as opposed to feeling obliged) to spend time with is one of the kindest things you can do for yourself.

There are people who fill you up and give you energy and there are others who drain and deplete you. Recognising this is the first step towards implementing time boundaries. When you identify someone you don't want to be with, reduce and limit the time you spend with them to benefit your own wellbeing.

Examples of time boundaries:

- 'I can't come this weekend.'
- 'I can only stay for an hour.'
- 'I'm happy to help with that. My hourly rate is [X].'(In response to family or friends asking you to use your professional skills to serve their need.)

Emotional boundaries

Emotional boundaries separate your emotions from those of others. They also help you to define where your responsibility for others' feelings begins and ends, and stop you feeling it's your job to fix them. And they help you to know who to trust with your emotions, too.

Examples of healthy emotional boundaries:

- Asking someone for space
- Not rescuing someone for feeling bad for hurting you
- Knowing who is safe to share with
- Communicating your no in the knowledge that someone's reaction to it is their responsibility, not yours
- Communicating discomfort when someone crosses a boundary
- Accepting help
- Refusing to take blame when you've done nothing wrong
- Finding out who you are outside a relationship
- Delegating tasks
- Recognising when your emotions are being used to manipulate you, such as fear, obligation and guilt
- Not projecting or assuming what someone else is feeling or thinking

- Recognising and communicating when you don't have the capacity for someone else's emotions – and when they don't have capacity for yours
- 'I'm going through a hard time at the minute and need to talk. Are you in a place to listen right now?'
- 'I'm so sorry you're going through a hard time. I'm not in a great place at the moment – can we come back to this when I have the capacity to offer the support you need?'

Physical boundaries

Physical boundaries protect your body, your right not to be touched and to have privacy and meet your physical needs (such as resting and eating). These boundaries communicate to others how close they can get to you, how much privacy you need, what kind of physical touch – if any – is OK and also how they behave in your personal space.

Examples of physical boundaries:

- 'I'm really tired. I need fifteen to rest and unwind.'
- 'I'm hungry. I'm taking a break to eat.'
- 'Knock before entering my room.'
- 'No thank you, I'm not a hugger. I prefer handshakes.'
- 'Do not touch me.'
- Consent: 'Can I give you a hug/kiss?'

Sexual boundaries

Sexual boundaries are the lines you draw around your sexual preferences and behaviours, comments or touch that you may or may not be comfortable with.

Examples of sexual boundaries:

- How people touch your body, including over or under your clothing
- How people treat you in a sexual encounter, what they say and the tone they use
- What you're comfortable or uncomfortable doing sexually with another person
- What physical touch you are comfortable with, for example, cuddling, touch over clothing, heavy petting, oral sex, anal sex
- Discussing and asking for what pleases you
- What parts of your body are off limits
- What other sexual activities you are comfortable or uncomfortable with – for example, photography, recordings, involving other people, S&M, fetishes, fantasies

Your needs and preferences are likely to change over the course of your life, so you may need to restate your boundaries in a relationship – you have a right to change your mind at any time. That is completely OK. Only you can decide what is right or comfortable for you. It is your body, so you get to decide.

Sometimes sexual boundaries may be pushed by a partner asking you to do something that you are uncomfortable with or not willing to do. If it does not feel right for you, don't do it. If you don't want to have sex or engage in any sexual activity, but you agree because you feel obligated or don't want the other person to get upset with you, that means you are not consenting voluntarily.

Sexual coercion is when you have expressed your disinterest or said no, and the other person uses persuasion, threats, manipulation and other tactics to get the outcome they want. Sexual assault refers to any sexual act without a person's consent. Consent that

is given under coercion is not freely given, so it does not count as consent. Recognising sexual coercion is hugely important in setting sexual boundaries.

Examples of sexual coercion:

- Not asking for consent
- Using pressure or influence, in any way, to get someone to agree with unwanted sexual acts
- Punishing, getting angry, sulking, stonewalling, giving the silent treatment when someone doesn't want to have sex or engage in sexual activity
- Using guilt tripping, motivational empathy, emotional blackmail
- Making threats: 'If you don't have sex with me, I'll find someone who will'
- Relentless badgering
- Giving drugs or alcohol to lower inhibitions

Violation of sexual boundaries also includes lying about contraception, removing contraception during intercourse without consent, shaming and name calling a partner for expressing their wants or needs for physical touch, sexual intimacy and criticising the other person's sexual preferences.

When Rebecca didn't want to have sex with her partner, they would say things like, 'If you really loved me, you wouldn't say no,' 'You don't fancy me any more, do you?' 'I'm not good enough for you,' 'I'm sorry I'm so repulsive,' which left Rebecca feeling guilty and pressured into having sex. Rebecca never shared this with any of her friends, and

only discovered it was abusive when she spoke about it with her therapist. Her healthy anger at how her partner abused her in all aspects of their relationship gave her the agency to leave the relationship.

Spiritual boundaries

Spirituality is something that is unique and personal to each individual. Nobody gets to dictate how or what anyone thinks about any kind of belief system, higher power or God. Often, we will hear that religion has been used to justify abuse and is often at the root of shaming narratives from narcissistic parents, who use fear of hell and shame around God's disapproval to control their children.

Religion doesn't justify abuse. If someone chooses to be part of a religion, that's a choice they make for themselves. If a parent raises a child in a particular religion, there has to be a point at which the child is allowed to make an autonomous decision about whether they want to continue along that path. Their safety in the family should not depend on their participation in any belief system.

The bullsh*t filter

How somebody responds to your boundaries is a clear indicator of how they care about you – because people who care about you care about your feelings. When someone advocates for themselves and this is met with anger, aggression, dismissal, ridicule, denial or revulsion, it is a red flag.

Instead of seeing the rejection of your boundary as a flaw within you, recognise that it's within the person who refuses to respect it.

Remember, nobody has to agree with your boundary, but healthy people will still respect it.

Anyone who guilt trips, stonewalls or gives you the silent treatment in response to your boundary is trying to manipulate and control you. 'No' is the ultimate bullsh*t filter, and the earlier you use it in a relationship, the quicker you will weed out anyone who is toxic.

As you learn to build your boundaries, you will soon see that for some people you need huge, impenetrable concrete walls, while for others you need flimsy picket fences. Because you can tell some people to hop back over the fence without fear of punishment, but the narcissist will always be looking for ways to burn the fence down, just for its very existence.

CHAPTER 14

Killing the Critical Voice

Megan: 'It's like she lives in my head, rent free, telling me all the things I'm doing wrong and all the ways I'm not good enough – always there, always criticising, always making me second guess myself, and making me feel like the worst human in the world. I wish I could make it go away.'

When Jack messed up, he pounced on himself with utter contempt.

'The other day I made toast for everyone then dropped the whole lot on the floor, butter side down. I was in a state for ages. Just couldn't calm down. I still can't stop mentally replaying it. I'm so f*ckin' stupid.'

Megan rejected compliments instantly. She didn't trust kindness either. She thought there was always an ulterior motive behind it, and if someone liked her, she must have 'tricked' them into it.

The dangling narrative

Messages we receive about ourselves from parents and caregivers during childhood become imprinted in our minds. They are called

narratives. Whether positive or negative, these narratives form our belief system about ourselves, and we go through life looking for things that confirm them, and overlooking things that contradict them – because confirmation of what we already believe makes us feel safe in the world.

This is great if the narratives are positive and teach us how valuable and loved we are. But if we are raised by constantly critical caregivers who belittle, ignore and reject us, we will spend our lives seeking to reinforce the negative self-narrative. We call this the critical voice. Also known as automatic negative thoughts, the saboteur, the inner critic, among other things, it might not be as loud as an actual voice, and many experience it more as feelings – of being pathetic, of shame, worthlessness, duplicity, selfishness, greed – or as constantly feeling judged and inferior.

The critical voice stems from the narcissistic parent's destructive narrative. Due to the complementary moral defence (see Chapter 5), we turn a parent's repeated criticisms inwards and believe their version of us, rather than being able to trust our own judgement and self-perception.

The critical voice is the voice of our scared inner child trying desperately to avoid punishment, trouble and any more emotional abandonment. In adulthood, this intense fear can make us feel constantly anxious, worried and hypervigilant to potential threats and danger.

Self-loathing

In a narcissistic family system, the child becomes hyper-aware of their imperfections because they learn that imperfection is dangerous in the quest to be accepted and loved. The only escape from

the deluge of criticism is perfection – because any deviation from that means rejection, abandonment and shame from the parent, as a result of which the child internalises those feelings of toxic shame whenever they're confronted with their imperfection. This often manifests as self-loathing.

> Jane loathed her body and could not look at herself naked in the mirror. 'I feel physically sick when I catch sight of myself coming out of the shower. Even with my clothes on I hate my body. I hate the way I walk. Even the way I stand in pictures infuriates me. I'm constantly on a diet, and even when I do lose weight it doesn't take long for me to put it back on and then some. I chastise myself for everything I eat. It's a constant battle.'

By criticising behaviour, standards, appearance, intelligence, emotions – anything – the critical voice destroys self-esteem, telling the child they are too much or not enough and, over time, it becomes intertwined with their identity.

How to spot the critical voice

The first step towards killing the critical voice is awareness of it – realising it is there and what it is saying and acknowledging how it makes you feel. Most people who have been raised in a narcissistic family system think it's just who they are – that the voice is a reliable representation of themselves. They even misconstrue it as helpful or motivational – something that makes them a good person – but this is horsesh*t. Who responds well to relentless and

cruel judgement and criticism? You can't criticise yourself into being a better version of yourself.

When Megan first came to therapy, she thought her critical voice was her conscience keeping her aligned with her morals. However, it is not a trustworthy moral guide like a conscience. It cannot be trusted because it uses shame, guilt and fear to motivate us. Our critical voices are also influenced by siblings, peers and other adults in our lives. The more exposed we are to criticism, rejection and negative messages, the louder the critical voice becomes.

As a layer of armour protecting the child from emotional abandonment, rejection, shame, punishment and humiliation, the critical voice functioned positively. It was a clever survival strategy back then, but in adulthood it becomes a toxic, destructive mechanism, debilitating us in relationship with ourselves and others. Instead of making someone feel good about themselves, the critical voice exhausts them with its constant torment and attack.

To help you recognise it, here are some examples of what it sounds like:

Common thoughts, statements and narratives

- I should do more; I just need to try harder.
- I am a failure. I should give up.
- I don't deserve love just as I am.
- I should be over this by now.
- No one will like me if I don't constantly give and perform.
- I am fat and ugly.
- I never measure up.
- I need to be the best or give up – average is unacceptable.
- I'll never succeed.

- I'm lazy.
- Things don't go as planned because I am useless and a failure.
- I don't want to start a new project unless I am sure of success.
- If people knew who I really was, they would not like the real me.
- Meeting my own needs is selfish.
- I'm a waste of space.
- I'm useless.
- I'm crazy.

The 'shoulds'

We talked about shoulds vs wants in Chapter 10, but they're also relevant here. When we do something because we should, it may be to avoid feeling the wrath of the critical voice, protecting ourselves from attack by confirming we are a terrible person for even considering doing what we want instead of what we should do. (Remember, it's easier to bear attack from ourselves than other people.)

Jack usually went to his see his mother every Mother's Day because he felt he should. He felt that not going would make him a bad person, and that his mother's happiness *should* be prioritised over his wife's.

Jack's critical voice was trying to protect him from his mother's stonewalling and anger. It wasn't that he was prioritising his mother over his wife; it was just that his wife's anger and hurt were easier to bear than his mother's, so he chose that path, dressing it up as 'I have to; I should'.

The critical voice reminds us that we're not living up to someone else's expectation – what we 'should' be doing to be a good or worthy person. The expectations and rules of others have become deeply ingrained in us and cemented in with guilt and shame.

Megan's family motto was family first. If a family member expressed a want or need, the expectation was that you dropped everything and tended to it. At thirty-six, Megan was still being ruled by what she 'should' do. The thought of saying no catapulted her inner critic into overdrive. 'I feel like a selfish bitch if I don't run to their aid regardless of whatever else is going on in my life. But then what could be more important than helping someone? I actually feel guilty all the time being the one who is kind of content with their life, and drama free. I'm grateful that I'm in the position to be able to help out.'

Like many children raised by a narcissistic parent, Megan only saw her value through what she could do for others and her critical voice relentlessly pursued this narrative because it kept her safe in childhood.

Martyrdom

The hyper-dependent's critical voice will want to continually show everyone how selfless they are. It will constantly chastise them for demonstrating a modicum of self-interest or self-care and tell them they are being selfish. And since they cannot bear the thought of being seen as self-absorbed or selfish, their critical voice will convince them that if anyone knew their true thoughts and feelings, they wouldn't like them. This makes the child of a narcissist avoid being authentic and vulnerable, hiding their real thoughts and feelings in their relationships to avoid rejection.

Control

Although Jane tried so hard, she could never please her mother. Even when she did something perfectly, her mother always found a way to criticise it. Jane's critical voice blamed her incessantly for her own failings and shortcomings and she believed her imperfections were the cause of her mother's rejection. She desperately tried to win her mother's approval, and each time she failed to do so, she became more and more despondent, her critical voice becoming increasingly toxic and hostile.

To combat this inner critic, Jane constantly tried to control situations and all possible outcomes. Her anxiety was so high that the only way to relieve the pressure was by doing, doing and more doing. Her critical voice was on overdrive, always telling her there was more to do, no time to rest, stop being so lazy. She would go way above and beyond what was required of her in every situation, worrying and obsessing over every eventuality to rule out any possibility of failure. Jane would never admit publicly to this, however, pretending that it was effortless.

The only way Jane could silence the critical voice, which was constantly shaming her, was to channel all her energy into more house cleaning, more cooking, more make-up, more clothes, more exercise, more preparing for X, Y or Z.

It's natural to want to have some control over your environment, especially if you have felt out of control for most of your life; but there is a line beyond which it becomes unhealthy, for both

yourself and those around you. Therefore, it's very important to be aware of where you are seeking control to feel safe.

Perfectionism

Jane was a self-confessed perfectionist. She felt guilty and could not relax until everything was done. She felt emotionally dysregulated when the beds were not made or there a cushion was out of place. She was a master at micro-managing her household, as it gave her a sense of control. Jane was meticulous in everything she did and was always overprepared.

Jane's critical voice was the driving force behind her perfectionism. The prospect of not being a success or being perceived as a failure was so unbearable that she took every pre-emptive measure possible to avoid it – because Jane believed that if she wasn't perfect, she wasn't lovable.

When Jane made a mistake, her rational brain wanted to correct it, but her critical voice did not want to find a solution – it only wanted to chastise her. Even after she'd fixed it, she berated herself constantly – for years, even – so deeply entrenched was her toxic shame.

Striving and wanting to do your best is a good thing, but the critical voice is relentless and pushes you way past the point of what's healthy. Remember that 'your best' is subjective and dependent on a number of factors. If you are only functioning at 60 per cent, then 60 per cent is your best. Good enough is good enough, and you don't need to be perfect to be doing well.

In Jack's mind, things were either 'right' or 'wrong'. He prided himself on being a perfectionist, saying, 'If a job is worth doing it's worth doing right!'

Jack viewed his critical voice as helpful, even though it was harsh and belittling – cruel, even. It made him feel as though he was in control, and in charge, but what he didn't realise was that the voice was actually his wounded inner child, desperately trying to avoid his father's wrath by being as perfect as possible.

Jack's critical voice did indeed protect him from his father's wrath when he was a child, but in adulthood it was self-destructive, leading to bad decision making, because it did not account for his needs (for connection, rest or fun), instead centring his fear that if his actions were unacceptable, he would be rejected and, therefore, a failure.

Jack's critical voice appeared in adulthood the same way it did in childhood; it was trying to protect him and keep him safe from embarrassment and shame. Whenever Jack didn't meet an expectation (whether his own or someone else's – although no one else's carried the same weight and shame as his), his critical voice would unleash a torrent of abuse. 'I get so f*cking mad at myself for making stupid mistakes when I f*ck up. I swear never to let it happen again.'

Just as Jack never satisfied his father, he could never satisfy his critical voice. Nothing he did was good enough and it would spoil anything achievement, no matter how impressive. 'I'm never happy. Even when I got my promotion I thought I should have achieved it five years previously. I can't just be happy.'

Projecting our critical voice on to others

The critical voice can also make us judgemental and critical of other people. It can project the same standard of perfectionism on to them, highlighting their flaws, using them as a weapon to push them away and keep them at a distance. And even if they're the most wonderful people in the world, the hyper-independent – because of their relational pattern – will be conditioned to believe that everyone behaves in the same way as their narcissistic parent, so they project that pattern on to whoever they meet. These critical-voice attacks on others are usually internal and silent but can show up as passive aggression – perhaps as withholding positive feedback or withdrawing from friends or partners when hurt.

Both the hyper-independent and hyper-dependent will project their critical voice on to others, but they will express it differently. When hurt, the hyper-dependent will withdraw and say, 'I'm fine' when they are clearly not, hoping that the other person will notice and mind read what they need. The hyper-independent, when hurt, will withdraw and strengthen their armour to protect from being hurt again. They will not reveal their hurt for fear it may be used against them in future.

The critical voice is the scared inner child, hypervigilant to attack/hurt/criticism/rejection. For the hyper-independent the critical voice is used as a tool to protect them from rejection by being vocal about perceived shortcomings and failures of others. They reject before they're rejected, using their critical voice under the guise of 'just being honest'. In this case, projection is protection.

Self-destruction and procrastination

The child of the narcissistic parent can never meet their expectations and, at some point, feeling defeated, they may give up to an

extent. In this case, their inner critic can be hard to detect because the perfectionist pendulum has swung so far the other way that the person gives up before they even try.

Rebecca's fear of failure paralysed her into not trying at all. Her relentless critical voice constantly focused on all the things that were wrong, shaming her whenever she attempted to take pride in something. It belittled her achievements, dismissing them as luck, mistakes or accidents. It burdened her with perfectionism and hyper-vigilance, constantly badgering her about past mistakes, while simultaneously issuing disparaging remarks about the present. Living with this vicious bully twenty-four/seven was paralysing her.

Rebecca habitually procrastinated until deadlines were imminent. 'I do everything else bar the thing I was supposed to! I clean my room, organise my stationery, prepare to study, plan to go to the library – everything instead of working hard, because if I fail when I haven't tried, I hurt less.'

Many of our clients have no idea the critical voice even exists. They believe all the lies it tells them about who they are, just as they believed their narcissistic parent. They believe its warning – that if they let people know who they really are, with all their flaws, they will be disliked and discarded, abandoned and isolated because nobody could love them the way they are.

Ironically, the inner critic creates the isolation it wants to protect from. It is a deceiver. It shames people into wanting to hide who they really are, putting up barriers to keep others at arm's length. And because of their fear of rejection, they will never say how they truly feel or hold healthy boundaries with someone they love.

Because the goal of the critical voice is to avoid hurt and rejection and convince the person to hide their authentic, imperfect self, it keeps them more disconnected, unseen and isolated. So if the critical voice remains in charge, fear and shame will prevent them from getting the very thing they want: connection.

Until we become aware that the critical voice exists and that we are repeating a pattern from childhood, it will recreate the very thing it is trying to protect against.

Recognising the critical voice

Although the hyper-dependent's and hyper-independent's behaviours look different, they are born of the same fear of intimacy and vulnerability. The child has learned it is not safe to be vulnerable and invest in emotional relationships. The critical voice, that scared-child voice, will try to prevent them from hurt and betrayal by constantly reinforcing the narrative that they can only rely on themselves if they want to ensure they are not emotionally discarded and abandoned.

When our clients first become aware of the critical voice, they often pile on more criticism: 'There I go, putting myself down again. I'm such a loser. Why do I keep doing this? I'll never get better, and no one will ever love me.' It is ineffective and destructive to beat yourself up for beating yourself up. This is the critical voice in play again. And, as we said earlier, awareness is key to killing it.

This awareness allows you to recognise that the things you say to yourself are things you have been told or have heard being told to others. This awareness and then generating self-compassion are paramount when working to silence the critical voice.

We need to have the most compassion for this part of ourselves and treat it as we would a beaten puppy or wounded child. It is frightened, scared, unable to articulate what it is scared of – pupils dilating or constricting to allow them to see danger more quickly, breathing rapidly, limbs shaking with adrenaline, preparing to fight, flee, freeze or fawn.

If you came across that frightened child or puppy, how would you feel about them? Would you have compassion for them or be angry with them? How would you approach them? Would you stand over them or kneel down? Would your voice be harsh or soft? What would your facial expression be like? What would you want them to see? What would they need to hear?

The job of healing is this: when you don't do something 100 per cent or you fail to meet a standard, think about how you want to treat the inner child. Do you rain down on them with scorn and contempt, repeating the cycle of abuse? Or do you stop and become aware of what is happening, softening the critical voice, recognising it is a scared child and offering it reassurance, kindness, compassion and support, affection, encouragement, security, emotional regulation.

The things they deserved but didn't receive.

Reparenting and inner-child work

Reparenting and inner-child work is recognising that all adult behaviours stem from childhood experiences. Reparenting addresses childhood trauma by focusing on how the adult actively works to meet their own emotional needs, where their parents failed to do so.

Firstly, it is essential to acknowledge *we all have an inner child* – because as long as we continue to ignore or deny them, they can sabotage our adult experience. Working with our inner child can help us to understand our relational patterns, behaviours, triggers, wants and needs. The inner child is the innocent part of us, the 'little us' full of our primal needs and emotions.

Our deepest wounds are carried by the inner child and when we tantrum, rage and try to control, it is because the inner child is being triggered. If we can focus on what we are experiencing as an adult from our inner child's perspective, we can see that those tantrums are the fearful unmet needs of our younger self – someone who feels unseen and unheard.

Jane: 'I feel like it wouldn't matter to him if I was in the house or not, once his dinner was in the oven, the house was clean and the children were taken care of. Then I get so bloody mad and completely lose it when he leaves his plate on the counter instead of putting it in the dishwasher.'

Jane's past was blurring with her present. She was no longer arguing with her husband about not cleaning up after himself, but being triggered and feeling childlike – unappreciated, taken advantage of, used as a maid. In arguing, she was asking for what we all want: to be seen, to be heard, to be respected.

Resentment is not a bad emotion. Our resentment is highlighting what we are envious of.

Jane was envious that everything was always done for her husband. She was envious of the way someone was taking care of him. Perhaps she would have liked to be cared for. Perhaps what she was trying to communicate to him through her anger was just that: that she needed to be cared for, too.

The hyper-independents will really struggle with this because although they might desperately want to be minded and cared for, their knee-jerk reaction is to reject the help. We repeat the relational pattern again and again, until we acknowledge what we didn't receive and then actively try to meet those needs in order to heal.

Like any relationship, the one we have with our inner child takes time to develop and nurture. As we said, the inner child is within all of us, although it may be hiding, waiting for someone to come and acknowledge its pain.

It may feel a bit strange at first even trying to connect to that part of yourself, but you need to be open to hearing and seeing its story.

Exercise: Connecting with your inner child

To connect to your inner child, it can be helpful to try to picture yourself at six or seven years old. Many of our clients have little or no memory of their childhood, so it can be helpful to have a photograph of your younger self or, if that's too uncomfortable, imagine another small child, until you're able to imagine yourself.

Ideally, your inner child will start to develop a trusting relationship with your adult self, so it can share openly. Stay curious about their emotional experience, their hopes, dreams, fears and worries. Begin a dialogue (whether internally, written, spoken) to develop the relationship. Talk about your memories of them and listen to their answers. Remember what it was like to be them (if you can't remember the stories of your childhood, it's enough to remember the feelings):

- What made them smile?
- What did they like doing?
- What did they get praised for?
- When did they get punished?
- Who did they like talking to?
- What were they interested in?
- What were they scared of?
- What were they hiding from the world?
- What did they want their parents to know?
- What comfort was given to them?
- Who did they talk to if they were feeling down or hurt?
- Who did they share their pain with?

Remember, every time you say, 'I know I shouldn't feel this way, but . . .' or, 'I know I'm being stupid, but . . .' you are gaslighting your inner child when they are looking to you for a need to be met, such as validation, comfort, reassurance.

Imagine you had a close friend who started a sentence with, 'I know I'm being stupid, but . . .' What might you say to them? There is a good chance that you would offer them reassurance and say, 'You're not being stupid,' and that would allow them to open up, feeling that you want to hear them, that you care. This is exactly what it is like for the inner child and the type of safe space we want to create.

Once the inner child knows it has your attention and that you are doing your best to offer it love and meet its needs, it will be more open and receptive to you, too. Regularly imagine that younger part of yourself in front of you and listen with compassion and empathy. Allow it to express its pain; let it cry, yell, ask questions – whatever it wants.

Reparenting your younger self is incredibly healing, giving you an internal mother/father who is readily available to you, and who will never abandon you.

Exercise: Reparenting visualisation

Close your eyes and imagine an adult you walking down the hall to your childhood bedroom.

Imagine walking into the room. What do you see? Do you notice any smells? Can you hear any noises from the other rooms? Brothers or sisters, if you had any?

Now imagine you can see your younger self. What are they wearing? Look at their hair their face, their eyes.

Sit with your child self and tell them all the things they needed to hear from an adult but didn't. What would you say to them? Would you hug them? If you want to tell them off, why?

When you've finished talking to your younger self, how do you feel at the thought of leaving them there? Do you want to take them with you? Would they want to come? Again, what do they need to hear? Here are some examples (when you decide to do this work, over time, as you develop a relationship with your inner child, imagine what it would have been like as a small child to have heard the words below – how it would have felt to be safe, loved, valued and wanted):

- I'm sorry that happened to you.
- You deserved better.
- I believe you.
- It wasn't your fault.
- You have nothing to be ashamed of.
- You are lovable and deserve to be loved.

There are no right or wrong answers in this exercise, but it's important to know that it can bring up a plethora of feelings. Some people are overwhelmed with compassion and empathy for their younger selves; others are angry and disgusted with them. Both reactions are valid; both come from self-protection. If you do find yourself overcome with anger and disgust, it can be helpful to ask yourself why. Remember, they were a child, and they didn't deserve it. They didn't fail; the adults did.

Reparenting is reassuring your inner child that they are deserving of love just as they are, and while most people know this on an intellectual level, you are integrating it here into your inner self and truly believing it by feeling it. The child is born worthy just as they are. Not by virtue of what they can do for others or what they can provide.

While you may experience a sense of relief in this part of your healing journey, you may also feel exhausted, because once you come out of survival mode, your body is shattered. The adrenaline tap is turned off and the body can literally collapse in need of serious rest.

Survival mode builds walls founded on fear of never being accepted for who you are, and now that the adrenaline is no longer holding up those walls, they begin to dissolve and allow the raw, vulnerable parts of you to be seen.

Here lies the vulnerability that your armour has concealed. Here are the wounds of emotional abandonment that you protected with fortresses, vowing not to get hurt again. Here sits the fear of asking for your needs to be met, hidden from the circling threats of shame, rejection and isolation.

Reconnecting to play

One way we can connect to our inner child is through play. Yes, you read that right – play!

Play is an extension of ourselves, our self-expression. To the child of a narcissist, play can sometimes be a foreign concept if they were locked in survival mode and couldn't inhabit a playful space, especially if the narcissistic parent did not view it as necessary or productive, placing burdens on them or shaming them for being joyful.

For parentified children, play is absent. The parentified child is more focused on obligation and what they 'should' do. Even the idea of inviting play can be so uncomfortable for the adult that they dismiss it. Their inner child, still feeling scared, doesn't want to lose control or be perceived as 'silly' or judged! Therefore, adult children of narcissistic parents can find it hard to cultivate time to prioritise hobbies that bring them joy because it feels self-indulgent or a waste of time. But within each of us, that inner child wants to experience the joy of play.

The healthy parent knows how important play is and that not everything has to be productive – that it can just be about enjoyment, and that joyful time is not wasted time. The healthy parent allows time for their child to play and rest because it is only when they feel safe that they feel free enough to play.

Working with your inner child entails creating a new sense of safety for the self that gives it the opportunity to let loose and play. Think back to when you were a child. What did you enjoy doing? What brought you pleasure? This can even be something you watched on television that sparked your imagination.

The process of practising and cultivating play can be very painful for the parentified child because, for many, the idea of 'playing' brings up unresolved shame and judgement. In the section on finding your edges, we looked at how to discover your likes and dislikes, starting small (see page 210). We can take the same approach to play. Start small and invite it in. It may just be

trying different clothes or hairstyles without scorn and judgement. Or you might prefer something more structured like a board game or cards. Structure generally works well for the parentified child because they can see sense in it – rules, winning, losing, etc. Playing for playing's sake can feel more difficult.

Exercise: Playing with play

What do you do for fun? What brings you or your inner child joy? (If you don't know, ask yourself what you might have wanted to do when you were a child.) Here is a list that may prompt you:

- Listening to your favourite music
- Singing/dancing (without judgement)
- Connecting with friends
- Board games
- Building Lego
- Jigsaw puzzles
- Card games
- Painting/drawing/colouring
- Baking
- Treating yourself to something you would normally consider frivolous
- Being free – there are no rules (well, there's one rule: the play has to be for your benefit only. No baking cookies to take to a neighbour, for example. If you decide afterwards to give them the cookies, that's fine, but the baking must not be done with that intent. You're making cookies to make yourself happy, no one else.)

Creativity

The point of play is to express yourself and cultivate creativity and joy. But if creativity was denied by the narcissistic parent, you might view it in a very limited way, as the exclusive realm of poets, writers, artists and musicians.

Yet we are creating all the time – because being creative is just bringing something into existence. So each time you cook or take a photo or video, you are creating. Each time you get a piercing (yes, your ears count!), a tattoo, colour your hair or even something as simple as a haircut, you are being creative.

To allow for creativity you need to feel safe. If you are stuck in fight or flight, living in a threatening, unpredictable, chaotic environment, it is nearly impossible to access your creative brain. If your survival is threatened, the brain does not deem it necessary to access play or creativity. Try to carve out a safe space – somewhere you won't be vulnerable and can breathe without fear of attack.

Megan: 'I remember feeling frustrated when my daughter came over with a bunch of daisies and wanted me to make a daisy chain. I'd put her off for ages, but she kept coming back. Reluctantly, I sat on the front step and started making this daisy chain. I don't even remember if I'd made one as a child, but I really got into it. I started asking her and the other children to look for daisies with long stems and I made them all necklaces, myself included. The joy I got from putting daisy chains around their necks, and even wearing my own, surprised me. I learned creativity and play are actually that simple.'

What would it be like to listen and cultivate your creativity? What if you encouraged it and stopped blaming and judging? What if the next time you cook a meal, set a table, arrange flowers, you stop and see how you have been creative and, contrary to what your narcissistic parent made you feel, you are allowed to be proud of what you've accomplished?

Emotional awareness – feeling your feelings

To reparent is to give to the inner child what it needs on an emotional level, which means listening to every aspect of it. Emotions are like a map, guiding us back to ourselves all the time. They guide us inwards and give us warning signs when we are about to betray ourselves.

Emotions simply give us information about what is happening in our present. Our primal need is to know whether we are safe, and if we do not feel safe, we will feel fear and be in fight or flight (dysregulated). The child raised by a narcissist will fear a change in tone, in body language or in the pattern of communication. Noticing this and recognising the fear of our inner child, we can acknowledge how scared they were, comfort them and tell them that now they are safe. This may feel overwhelming and it is not unusual to become angry or upset. It may also bring up emotions that have been deeply buried. We need to allow those feelings to come, observe them, feel them but not judge them. Writing them down can help to release them. They are valid.

> Megan: 'I was always so "strong". Nothing ever bothered me. I never let anyone get close enough to hurt me. Now I can make room for that scared younger me, I feel so sorry

for her. I cry for her and I let her cry. I tell her she doesn't have to fight so hard any more; she doesn't have to build walls and moats and dams to keep people out. I tell her it is safe to love and be loved, even though it is scary as f*ck because I cannot guarantee we will not get hurt. In fact, it's inevitable – because even in death there is an ending, and that is scary. But honestly, feeling nothing and staying numb is even scarier.'

Working with your inner child is both one of the most difficult and one of the most rewarding things you can do because it is the gateway to reconnecting you to who you always were, access to whom was previously denied.

Reparenting is positioning yourself as the parent you never had, meeting the inner child's unmet needs. It's a delicate process – you don't just rip the band aid off (and you certainly don't take off your armour if you are still under attack). But with the help of safe people – a close friend or a therapist, for example – you expose each wound slowly and gradually, cleaning out any debris and applying a fresh band aid, until it is fully healed.

Ingrained, conditioned patterns are hard to break, and when you're tired, sick or stressed, it's harder to challenge yourself, so you often revert to those behaviours. But over time, the critical voice – no longer full of self-hate and judgement – becomes the voice of the parent you wish you'd had, providing loving presence and compassion, encouraging you to do better and strive for greatness, all the while reminding you that your worth does not depend on this; that you are loved exactly as you are.

Step away from the expectations and beliefs of the narcissistic parent and relearn that there are no rules. As long as you are not

hurting yourself, or others, there is no right or wrong way to live your life.

Here are some reparenting phrases to regularly remind yourself of all this:

- Making mistakes is normal and natural. I have pride in myself for trying new and difficult things.
- I can do difficult things.
- Feeling fear is normal when I step out of my comfort zone.
- I will ask for help.
- I am worthy of receiving.
- I will allow my body rest.
- I am allowed to take my time to make decisions.
- I give myself permission to play.
- I trust myself.

Finally, one of the most important aspects of killing the critical voice is to stop minimising and dismissing the trauma you endured in childhood. If you've recognised yourself and your parents throughout this book, then yes, it was that bad. You deserved better and your parent failed you, and for that we are sorry. It's with validation and compassion that we stop gaslighting ourselves and experience the grief of what it truly means to be emotionally abandoned. And it is through that grief that we get to break the cycle and choose to live – not just to survive.

CHAPTER 15

Killing the Hope

> Rebecca: 'Letting go of the idea that she will be who I need her to be feels like the final step. But it also feels like it's going to drown me in sadness. I'm so sick of being sad, but I need to accept she will never be the mum I wanted.'

In our client work, and also socially, we see people returning to abusive relationships over and over again, knowing they are toxic and harmful, yet seemingly unable to leave for good. There are two reasons for this.

The first is that the trauma bond is so strong it mimics heroin addiction in terms of the chemicals released in the brain (see p. 159). The second is hope: hope that the relationship can be what was promised and that this time the person in question really will change.

To be truly free of the narcissist in our lives, we have to break the trauma bond by killing the hope. This is a gargantuan task and requires a number of things to be in place, such as a good sense of identity and the ability to cope with rejection. But, most importantly, it requires acceptance that the narcissist will never be who we want them to be, or who they promised they were, and allowing all hope of this to die. Because hope is the anchor that keeps someone in relationship with a narcissist, whether they are a parent, sibling, partner, friend or colleague.

It's controversial for therapists to say 'kill the hope', but this isn't about the kind of hope that keeps us moving through life, promising us happiness and joy. It's about hope that is toxic and weaponised against us in a bid to keep us under someone else's control and dominance. Hope, in this instance, is denial, and denial is avoidance of grief.

But while we do need to kill the hope, we also need to remember that, as with every other trauma response we've described, hope helps people to survive childhood. Hope is the driving force that allows a child to feel powerful and optimistic about a different tomorrow, regardless of how bad today was. As such, it deserves the same kindness and compassion as every other piece of armour we remove in healing.

Killing the hope is letting go of our desire to fix someone – the hope that we matter enough for them to change and that they will be what we need them to be. Killing the hope is recognising that we are in charge of our relationships and environment and we have the power to change. Killing the hope is accepting that our desire for healthy, happy relationships with the person in question is hopeless.

It's devastating to even write that last sentence. But freedom, liberation and peace lie in that acceptance. Killing the hope is about grieving what has been lost, but also what will never be; it's about grieving what you should have had and accepting that you had no power over that and there is no way you ever will.

The impact of growing up with a narcissistic parent will look different for everyone. Jack, Jane, Rebecca and Megan all had very different experiences, and very different trauma responses in terms of hyper-dependence and hyper-independence. What they all shared, though, was that they had things to grieve.

We are often asked, 'But how do you grieve?' Well, it's hard. It's noticing the losses and feeling the associated feelings. One way

to do this is through journal exercises. There are multiple ways to journal. It could be writing, videoing, drawing, even. It entails telling the stories and connecting to them.

Killing the hope and breaking the trauma bond is allowing yourself to grieve the losses you are experiencing with self-empathy and compassion. Below are a few ideas of how to kill the hope for different relationships.

Killing the hope in a narcissistic romantic relationship

Jane: 'But when it's good it's amazing, if it was like that all the time it would be the best relationship anyone has ever had. When it's bad . . . it's like a living nightmare. He's a stranger to me.'

Jane was trauma bonded to her husband. She recognised that the bad times far outweighed the good and that she was stuck in a place where she was unhappy in the relationship but scared to move out of it, too. Jane's relationship and childhood with her mother left her with a terror of rejection and a pervasive feeling of not being good enough.

At first, Jane's husband's attention and adoration (love bombing) were like an instant healing balm to her trauma wounds. She felt seen, heard and valued for the first time in her life. However, he then exploited her wounds, using breadcrumbing, and the fear that he was going to reject and abandon her made Jane panic. When he did this and then, eventually, contacted her, the relief of not being rejected

and abandoned was so intense that Jane said nothing to challenge him for his absence, lest he disappeared again.

The fear and the relief created Jane's silence and strengthened the trauma bond with her husband. And it was the trauma bond and the awful pain of the withdrawal from it that made her tolerate his treatment of her – because when he was love bombing her, the relief to her trauma wounds was so intense, she was prepared to put up with anything to hold on to those moments, even if they were few and far between.

However, Jane realised that this relationship hurt her and capitalised on – even added to – her trauma from childhood. And she knew that it was time to leave it. She therefore wanted to break the trauma bond with her husband.

When Jane did the exercise below, she had to look at her relationship with honest eyes.

Jane: 'I just want it to be what it was. In the beginning it was so wonderful. We were in this amazing bubble of us against the world. The bubble was so warm and safe and lovely, but over time, it's degraded and now I barely ever feel it. I miss what it was, but now when I look back, I'm starting to think it was only like that because it wasn't real – it wasn't based on him knowing me, it was based on him wanting me to be someone I wasn't, and I was trying to live up to that all the time.'

Jane remembered the beginning of the relationship as being good 95 per cent of the time, but that greatly diminished to 5 per cent, and she was stuck in the hope that it would return to how it was. By asking her to compare the beginning with now, we were showing her that her husband's words didn't match the behaviour, and that the reality was her relationship would never again be what it was.

When trying to kill the hope, we need to ignore the things that the person in question said and look at the things they did and the things that we lost as a result of listening to them.

Exercise: Removing the rose-tinted glasses

The questions below are brutal and need to be approached gently and with self-compassion. Remember, no shame or blame of self are attached; rather, it is empowering and helps you to know what to look for in the future.

- Can you describe the beginning of the relationship:
  - What attracted you to them?
  - How did it feel?
  - What red flags did you ignore (niggles, things you didn't like, things they said you didn't agree with, the way they communicated with you, times you should have disagreed or said no to them)?
  - How often did they contact you? Was it enough? Was it too much?
  - How did it feel when you realised it was them calling/texting, etc?
- How would an observer describe the relationship (not the partner, the relationship)?
- What did you have in common?
- What do you still have in common?
- Expressed as a percentage, how often was it good at the beginning?
- How often is it good now?

- Describe your ideal partner as fully as possible – values, manners, attitude to work, life, relationships, conflict, interests, hobbies. What would the two of you do together? What would that feel like?
- Describe your current partner as fully as possible.
- How did your partner describe themselves? Who did you believe them to be?
- If you ask your partner to change, do they attempt to do so?
- How does your partner respond to your feelings?
- Would you want someone you love to be in a relationship like yours?
- If you were in the same situation you're in now in a year's time, how would that feel?

Killing the hope with a narcissistic parent

Megan: 'I just wish I had a normal mum. I wish she could be nice to me, not just when she wants me to do something for her. It's so devastating to know that she knows how to be kind but chooses not to be, unless it's to get something from me.'

Exercise: Grief

Grieving the parent you didn't have means looking at the parent you needed. With this exercise, you can identify the full picture of what was lost but, importantly, identify the feelings that go along with those losses. To do

that, after each response, write about how answering the question made you feel.

- Describe your parent as fully as possible.
- How did your parent react when you made a mistake?
- How would you have liked them to react (tone, facial expression, body language)?
- How did your parent spend time with you?
- How would you have liked your parent to play with you?
- What things did your parent do or say that you didn't like?
- What would your perfect parent have been like? (Go into as much detail as possible, describing what they would have looked like, what the home would have looked like, how they would have talked to you and others . . .)

The next exercise – a letter to the narcissistic parent – can be both extremely cathartic and intensely triggering. It needs to be approached with care and kindness to self and it may take a long time to do it.

Note: People who do this exercise often want to send whatever they've written immediately. We can't tell anyone what to do, but we advise against this strongly. We suggest leaving at least four weeks before sending it, if you still want to do so.

Exercise: A letter to the narcissistic parent

Write a letter to your narcissistic parent, getting down everything you ever wanted to say but didn't because it was too dangerous. Tell your story – the injustice,

the wounds, the slights, the comments, the neglect, the smothering. Every single thing that your parent did or didn't do should be laid out – every time they hurt, belittled, wounded, disappointed or criticised you, let you down, broke promises, embarrassed, shamed or humiliated you.

Killing the hope with the narcissistic parent means smashing the narratives they've been brainwashing you with since you were born. However, those narratives are sometimes hard to see straight away. The obvious ones are typically 'you're selfish/lazy/needy/greedy/demanding/hard work/clumsy/cold-hearted/secretive/dramatic/inconsiderate/thoughtless . . .' and they all come from a place of rage because the child isn't capitulating to the parent's demand. Less obvious narratives are just as destructive, but they might be so ingrained that you don't even realise they're there. They might be things like 'you'll never have a successful relationship/you're a bad cook/disorganised/unable to finish things/bad at exams . . .' They will be different for everyone, but any time you have a negative thing to say or think about yourself, ask: 'How do I know that?'

Grieving the parent you did not have

Many of our clients don't grieve their narcissistic parent, but they do grieve the parent they wished they'd had. The one that didn't exist. That loss is as real as if a parent has died, and at various events, milestones and occasions the grief can be reignited. In fact, in many respects it can be worse (not that we advocate for

competitive trauma) because the living parent, in this case, inflicts huge wounds that are carried through life, impeding every relationship into adulthood, so the grief is not just for the parent they didn't have, but for the things that were done to them, and the things they didn't get to experience. The grief wounds the narcissistic parent leaves are where they failed to show the love, comfort, validation, support and kindness their child deserved.

> Megan: 'Sometimes I see my friends with their mothers, just having a coffee or having a chat, and my heart aches that I will never experience that with my mother.'

Often, when the adult child of a narcissist experiences the grief Megan describes they will gaslight themselves, saying they should be 'over it by now'. This can be reinforced by society gaslighting their experience, too, suggesting that they should 'let bygones be bygones'. This is so invalidating. Nobody would say that to someone whose parent actually died; no one would tell them, 'You should be over it by now. Move on.' No, they would hold the person in empathy and have compassion for their grief. They would offer support and validation, which would allow the person to heal.

Like any other grief, the grief for the parent you didn't have can lie dormant for a long time, then come along at the most unexpected time, like a wave that knocks you off your feet. Sometimes it can have such force that you feel it could crush and drown you. Grief is a term used to describe a collection of emotions in response to loss, and though emotions can be extremely uncomfortable, they are not dangerous and won't kill you. The hardest part is embracing the wave. Which means you stop resisting the grief and instead embrace it – because that is what will kill the hope. Allow that wave to both engulf and wash over you.

You may have heard (and may even be sick of hearing) therapists tell you to 'actually feel your feelings'. We've talked about that here, too. But what does that look like? It means allowing yourself to feel the emotion, anger, sadness, hurt, betrayal, loss, without shaming yourself in the process. Recognise where you feel it in your body. In your stomach, chest or throat? Is it a heavy feeling or is it light? What colour is it? Is it hot or cold? Does it have a shape or feel like a void? (Note: There are no right or wrong answers here; your experience is valid.) Validate your feelings: 'Of course you feel like this; you are feeling exactly as you're supposed to be feeling'. Offer yourself compassion: 'I'm so sorry you went through this; you didn't deserve to be treated that way.' Ask yourself what do you need right now? Compassion? Empathy? Reassurance? Nurturance? Validation?

Exercise: Identifying the parent wound

Write the story of the parent you had. Write down the way you were treated and how you were spoken to. Write what it was like for you when you were in their company. How did they greet you? How did you feel?

Now write the story of the parent you wished you'd had. Imagine they were there when you woke in the mornings or when you came in from school. What would that look like? How would you feel? Notice, for example, when you were injured, and look at the direct and indirect messages you received. Notice what it would have been like to have the parent you needed. What would they have said to you? How would they have comforted you? What type of tone would they have used? What

would their facial expression have been like? What about their body language?

Compare the two 'stories' and really look at the loss of what wasn't met in childhood and the pain of not having those things.

Jack: 'I was never allowed to cry. I was always told to man up and not be a little girl's blouse. Looking back, I would have liked him to just acknowledge that I had bloody hurt myself and it was sore. I would have liked his voice to be gentle and his facial expression warm. I wished he'd just knelt down to my level or even picked me up. I realise how little I was actually looking for. It was just the bare minimum, but he couldn't give it to me. I was just a child looking to be loved and cared for.'

Rebecca felt constantly ignored. She was criticised every time she deviated from her mother's expectations of her. She was too loud, too quiet, too much and at the same time never enough.

She wished for a parent who would have allowed her to be herself, a parent who embraced all her quirks. Rebecca wished she had been allowed to have fun, to just be silly at times. She wished her mother had said to her, just once, 'You're amazing the way you are. You don't need to pretend to be anything that you're not.'

Jane wished she had a parent who allowed her a private space without accusations of being deceptive or doing something wrong if she wanted the door shut. Jane wished she had a parent who allowed her to grow into who she was meant to be. She wished she

had a mother who would hear her no and allow her autonomy and independence, without taking it as a personal rejection and shaming her for it. Above all else, Jane wished her mother would love her for who she was, not who she wanted her to be.

Megan often wished she and her mother could recreate the closeness they'd had and then would be jolted back to reality recognising that it wasn't closeness – it was abuse. Megan wished she had a parent who wanted to get to know her, who actually wanted to hear how her day was. Megan wished she had a mother she didn't have to compete with, one who wasn't jealous of her relationships and success. Megan wished she had a mother who didn't pit her children against each other. Megan didn't wish for the perfect mother; she wished for one who wasn't abusive.

Grieving the loss of who you could have been

Who would you have been if you'd been brought up without abuse and neglect? Who would you have been if you'd had the parent you wished you'd had – the parent you deserved. What sort of relationships would you have had? What sort of relationships would you have avoided? What would your boundaries have looked like?

This is a huge part of the grieving process that is often overlooked or skipped, and we understand that it can be easier in the moment to avoid the grief. However, just because we ignore it, that doesn't mean it's not there. Denial does not make it go away – it just suppresses and traps it. And it needs to be released.

Many of our clients think they wouldn't change their pasts because they 'made them stronger'. We want to challenge that

perspective. Because when you're a child, you don't need to be strong – you need to be safe.

Sometimes people attribute their increased empathy and compassion to the trauma they've experienced. We challenge that, too. Because it's likely they would have been that way anyway. To suggest that someone should be grateful for their trauma and the way it moulded them is toxic positivity.

Yes, trauma does sometimes make people more compassionate or more empathetic. But what a terrible price to pay for something we learn naturally in healthy environments. The overdeveloped empathy and compassion that some people learn as a result of having had to predict what someone else was thinking and feeling because their safety depended on it can wound them in adult relationships. That's because it's so heightened that they feel (sometimes presumptively) what everyone else around them feels in order to protect themselves. And that isn't a good thing.

A child who is raised without being continually shamed is allowed to be themselves. They know who they are and trust their ability to make decisions. They don't fear conflict and they are able to stand up for themselves and, as a result, not be continually exploited and abused in relationships.

The child who is brought up in a healthy environment does not fear rejection. And they are compassionate when they are inevitably rejected – because rejection is part of life. So someone with a healthy attachment will grieve their loss when rejected, but won't sit in shame that they are unlovable. They will reach out for help and support when they are low and are not afraid of vulnerability.

The child who is brought up in a healthy environment knows their edges and doesn't lose themselves in another. They have kindness and compassion in spades but because these are not

being exploited, they will also have a strong sense of who they are. They will hold their boundaries.

Hope as denial of grief

> Megan: 'It's too painful to give up hope. It hurts so much. I just keep thinking, If only I could explain it properly, so they understand this or that, it would be OK. They would see why it hurts me so much, and they would say sorry. Then I could have the parents I've always wanted in my life.'

When you fully feel the grief, you move through it. You don't sit in victimhood and let it define you. You recognise the loss of what you should have received, what you deserved, and you embody that space, that knowing. You don't deny and suppress it any longer. You take off the rose-tinted glasses and you kill the hope. And then you are free.

But when you deny grief, you are avoiding pain. And why not? The pain is horrible! It *hurts*, it's sad and woeful, and crap and rubbish, and everyone else is just having a Tuesday, while you are tearing yourself inside out, trying to grasp the fact that someone who should have loved you unconditionally did nothing but add layers and layers of conditions on to the 'love' they offered. And that's devastating.

The depth of the pain you are avoiding is unfathomable. And perhaps the worst part is that when you sit in this type of hope, you not only sit in denial, but in self-blame, too. Because self-blame shifts the responsibility for the relationship on to you, which gives you hope that you can change things.

The problem is, you just can't. You cannot control someone else's behaviour; and relationships have to be fixed by all parties, not just one. Sitting in the hope that if you just did X, Y and Z, things could – and would – be different means you are blaming yourself for the way things are now.

And that isn't fair. Because you were never the problem.

Dear Reader . . .

Well, that was a lot of information in a short space of time. We realise its impact may be huge, and there's a lot to process, but we hope you will see the freedom on the other side, the relief and a lifetime of healthy relationships in which you can be your whole self and your voice is celebrated instead of shamed.

Understanding and accepting the information in these pages is like burning everything to the ground in terms of what you knew the world to look like. But we want you to remember that in the wake of almost any natural disaster (volcanoes, tsunamis, forest fires . . .) new growth emerges. Fresh ways of being are born of the destruction of landscapes – often healthier, happier, richer environments that promote survival as a result.

Removing your trauma armour (as long as it is safe for you to do so) leaves you fresh and raw, and that shedding of the old makes way for new skin to grow that may be softer, but also much healthier.

For those who recognise themselves in this book, we know this is painful. We know how much it hurts. We know the devastation that narcissistic parenting brings to lives. But hard as it may be, we also know how hopeful it is to see and allow the destruction of old patterns as they make way for new ones.

Being able to sit with this knowledge is one of the most powerful things you can do when you've grown up in an unhealthy family dynamic. Accepting that you had no control over the way you were treated and the way your parent behaved is – and will be – life changing.

Thank you for getting this far.

Take care,

Helen and Katie XX

Further Reading

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Find us at insightpodcast.com

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